

A Discovery of Chinese Undergraduates' Engagement on Campus

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Abstract

Student engagement is widely used in higher education policy and research, yet its meaning remains conceptually fragmented and research often privileges visible and measurable forms of participation. Empirically, existing studies tend to cluster around large-scale survey snapshots or tightly bounded analyses of engagement in particular tasks, classrooms, or platforms. Campus-wide accounts of how engagement unfolds in everyday university life remain limited. In China, student engagement has increasingly been adopted as a borrowed concept in policy and research, but its local interpretation, negotiation, and governance remain underexplored.

This thesis addresses these gaps through a qualitative study of day-to-day undergraduate engagement at a Chinese public university. It asks: (1) in what ways do Chinese undergraduates describe their engagement, including whom they engage with, where engagement takes place, and what forms it takes; and (2) what enablers and barriers shape that engagement? Taking a non-normative stance, the study examines what undergraduates do rather than what they ought to do. It adopts a dual lens: a sociomaterial lens to trace everyday engagement practices, and a Foucauldian lens to analyse how governance, power, visibility, evaluation, and self-discipline shape those practices. The study draws on forty semi-structured interviews with undergraduates in Years 1–4, conducted in Chinese and analysed through reflexive thematic analysis.

The findings show that engagement was selective, uneven, and object-related rather than a single stable condition. Participants engaged with a wide range of human and non-human actors, including teachers, peers, online materials, and Artificial Intelligence, across hybrid campus spaces. Conditions such as assessment demands, power relations, and surveillance did not operate as fixed enablers or barriers; their effects depended on how they were configured in particular situations. The thesis develops “made-in-China student engagement” as an analytic to capture a hybrid formation shaped by both international and local forces, and argues for understanding engagement as a lived practice organised through context, relations, and conditions.

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Always keep the faith.

To those who know I am not perfect but still trust and love me.

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Author's declaration: I declare that this thesis is my original work and has not been submitted in part or whole for the award of another degree at this or any other university.

The word count conforms to the permitted maximum.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview

This chapter introduces the study and positions it within the field of student engagement research. It outlines the background and research problem, situates the study in the context of contemporary Chinese higher education, and states the research purpose, aims, and questions. The chapter then clarifies the conceptual orientation adopted in this thesis and provides a brief overview of the two theoretical lenses used to interpret student engagement. It also introduces the research design and highlights the contributions and significance of the study. The chapter concludes by outlining the structure of the thesis.

1.2 Background and Research Problem

In contemporary higher education, student engagement is widely used to refer to learners' participation in educationally purposeful activities and is closely associated with teaching practices, learning outcomes, curriculum development, student satisfaction, and the general student experience (Trowler, 2010). It has become a practical term for discussing, monitoring, and justifying teaching quality (Gourlay, 2015). This prominence is largely because it translates an abstract question about what counts as a good university experience and desirable learning outcomes into more observable and traceable practices: the time and effort students invest in educationally purposeful activities, and the conditions institutions organise to encourage participation (Kuh et al., 2007). In this sense, student engagement is no longer merely a pedagogical concern within institutional practices (Kuh, 2009); it has increasingly become a prominent indicator of institutional teaching quality and competitiveness (Trowler, 2010). In addition, neoliberal ideology and global marketisation of higher education have intensified the instrumental use of engagement (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017).

At the same time, engagement is not a settled concept, and the field of research around it remains highly fragmented. Existing scholarship is extensive and spans diverse conceptual meanings, methodological approaches, disciplinary contexts,

and student groups (Tight, 2020). The field has long been criticised for conceptual ambiguity (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). Trowler (2010) critiques the term's use as "chaotic" in "a mixed bag" (p. 9), while Zepke (2015) and Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) caution against the uncritical uptake of engagement as a self-evident solution. Indeed, student engagement is a multidimensional and complex construct (Kahu, 2013). Any single definition would be overly generic and fail to account for individual, cultural, disciplinary, and historical differences (Zepke, 2018). These critiques matter because they shape what student engagement is assumed to be, how it is operationalised, and whose interests are prioritised when engagement is promoted.

A particularly important problem concerns the object of engagement. As Ashwin and McVitty (2015) argue, the literature often fails to specify what students are engaging with, even though the meaning of engagement shifts with its object. Without attention to this question, engagement can easily be reduced to a generic intensity of participation rather than understood as a situated educational relationship. This matters especially in higher education, where engagement with disciplinary and professional knowledge is central to students' broader engagement with curricula and academic communities (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). Relatedly, Zepke (2018) notes that the literature pays insufficient attention to students' action in constructing knowledge. Together, these critiques suggest that student engagement cannot be understood adequately if it is treated only as visible activity or general effort.

Methodological tendencies in the field intensify these problems. While efforts have been made to categorise engagement research, dominant strands have tended to privilege what can be measured and compared. Zepke (2015) identifies two broad strands: one focused on identifying and measuring engagement behaviours, and another oriented towards facilitating students' academic and social integration. However, quantitative approaches – particularly standardised survey measurement – have become especially central (Bryson, 2014; Gourlay, 2015; Zepke, 2015). Zepke (2015) argues that such measures can generate a "feeling of certainty", while also functioning as a technology of control that narrows how engagement is conceptualised. A related concern is that indicator-

led approaches can downplay student agency by assuming engagement rather than recognising that engagement cannot be assumed but must be negotiated with students (Neary, 2010; Zepke, 2018). Where engagement research becomes aligned with institutional targets rather than students' meanings and interests, this tendency may be further reinforced, especially when universities increasingly employ engagement as a marketing tool (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; Trowler, 2010).

Two further limitations follow from these conceptual and methodological preferences. First, mainstream conceptions of engagement tend to privilege practices that are observable, verbal, communal, and indicative of participation, while quieter, private, unobserved, and solitary practices are more easily overlooked or treated as deficient, even though they may be central to student engagement (Gourlay, 2015). Second, survey-based studies often offer a snapshot of student engagement at a given moment and leave limited room for understanding engagement as a fluid, dynamic, and situational phenomenon that shifts across time, space, and objects (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Coates, 2007; Gourlay, 2015). These tendencies can also reinforce more performative and accountability-driven understandings of engagement (Gourlay, 2015; Zepke, 2015). These issues are especially salient where engagement is closely entangled with assessment. Participation requirements, tasks, and performance criteria may encourage engagement, yet they may also encourage students towards strategic compliance with what is recognised as "good" and "useful" engagement. As McArthur (2023) notes, "performing a task does not mean an awful lot until we are able to establish that such a task is worth doing" (p. 94).

These debates also point to a deeper conceptual issue: the current understanding of student engagement relies on a strongly humanistic conception of education. It places the putative agentive and free-floating human at the centre, with objects, resources, and devices relegated to the status of tools, while spatial and temporal dimensions are regarded as the context for human action and endeavour (Gourlay, 2015). Gourlay and Oliver (2016) demonstrate that studying is not confined to institutions; it takes place across various public and private spaces, coalescing as an educational practice through the consistent use of print

and digital technologies. Building on this, Gourlay (2017) proposes an extension of student engagement that recognises its sociomaterial aspects (Fenwick et al., 2011) and fully accounts for the distribution of human and non-human agency in day-to-day student practice, thereby allowing a richer and more nuanced conceptualisation.

This move beyond human-centred assumptions is increasingly relevant in contemporary universities. With the rapid interpenetration of digital and material elements, on-campus activities increasingly involve digital tools and resources, making universities hybrid settings supported by digital infrastructures (Goodyear, 2020). Much of the engagement literature in higher education separates students' physical and digital sites of study and treats them as distinct domains. This can obscure the complexity of students' day-to-day practices, where physical and digital forms of learning and education are often closely intertwined rather than neatly separable into an either-or binary (Carvalho et al., 2017; Gourlay, 2015). Learning is therefore situated within a broad, interconnected ecology of environments (physical and virtual; institutional and extra-institutional) and resources (teachers and other professionals, peers, personal connections and family members, and non-human resources, including digital artefacts). Together, those "environments and resources support and structure the learning experience of an educational community" (Bligh, 2019, p. 1). Recent developments, such as the growing availability of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools, further complicate what engagement can look like in everyday study, reinforcing the need to attend to how engagement is enacted across spaces, technologies, and relationships.

There are also important limits in how engagement is commonly observed and researched. Existing studies often cluster at two ends: large-scale survey and benchmarking research on the one hand, and highly localised classroom-, task-, or platform-specific studies on the other. Between these two strands, there is less fine-grained work that examines engagement as day-to-day campus practice across interconnected settings. As noted above, this gap matters because dominant approaches tend to privilege what is measurable and visible, leaving

less room for understanding engagement as situated practice across spaces, technologies, and time (Gourlay, 2015).

Taken together, these issues matter for the present study because they shape how student engagement is framed as a research problem. This thesis, therefore, examines Chinese undergraduate engagement as it is described and organised in everyday campus life – who students engage with, where engagement takes place, and what forms it takes – while also exploring the conditions that shape and differentiate these practices. Although the language of “enablers” and “barriers” is widely used in academia, this study treats shaping conditions as relational and context-dependent rather than as fixed variables with stable effects. The next section situates this research problem in the context of Chinese higher education.

1.3 Positioning the Study in the Chinese Higher Education Context

This section situates the study within contemporary Chinese higher education by outlining rapid system expansion alongside persistent stratification, the links between higher education, national development, and labour-market agendas, governance reforms associated with evaluation and performance, and the campus-based conditions within which undergraduate engagement is organised. The purpose is not to provide a full policy review, but to introduce the background conditions against which engagement is enacted, recognised, and interpreted in everyday practice.

Since the late 1990s, Chinese higher education has expanded rapidly, moving from elite provision towards mass participation. Official reporting indicates that China had 3,074 higher education institutions and over 47.63 million higher education students in 2023, with a gross enrolment ratio of 60.2% (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China [MoE], 2024). As the system has expanded, attention to quality assurance, institutional evaluation, and performance has also intensified. These developments have shaped how universities are expected to demonstrate improvement and account for educational provision (Liu, 2013, 2015; Wang, 2014). National excellence

initiatives form part of this policy environment. For example, the Double First-Class initiative frames world-class development and international competitiveness as strategic priorities (MoE, 2022). For the present study, this provides important context for the institutional environment in which universities and students operate. It is also important to note that, in Chinese higher education, student engagement has largely circulated as an imported but locally reconstructed concept, closely tied to survey frameworks, quality evaluation, and institutional improvement. However, the thesis does not treat Double First-Class universities as a closed category to be represented.

Alongside expansion, the system remains strongly hierarchical and competitively differentiated. Expanding access to higher education does not necessarily make access to elite institutions and opportunities more equal (Marginson, 2016). In China, access to higher-status universities is shaped not only by examination performance but also by regionally differentiated opportunity structures. In particular, the uneven distribution of top institutions and the operation of provincial admissions quotas within the Gaokao contribute to systematic regional inequalities in access (Hamnett et al., 2019). System-level analyses also show persistent provincial differences in the supply of higher education, both in quantity and in quality (Borsi et al., 2022; Liu & Ma, 2018). These structural differences do not determine engagement, but they do help explain why students' resource conditions, competitive pressures, and judgements about what forms of participation are feasible or worthwhile may vary across contexts.

These differences are tied to wider economic pressures and labour-market agendas. Universities have been positioned as important sites for producing skilled labour and supporting national competitiveness, while massification has coincided with intensified pressure around graduate transitions, employability, and mobility (Mok, 2021; Mok & Jiang, 2018). This does not predetermine how students engage. However, it helps to explain why some undergraduates may evaluate participation and effort not only in educational terms, such as learning and belonging, but also in relation to opportunity, risk, and future competitiveness. More broadly, Chinese higher education has been shaped by market-oriented reforms and performance management, but in ways that remain closely

intertwined with strong state steering and national development priorities. In this thesis, these governance orientations are treated as background conditions. Their implications for engagement are analysed later in relation to both existing scholarship and the empirical material.

To connect these macro conditions to undergraduate life, it is important to note several features of campus-based study in many Chinese public universities. Undergraduate life is commonly organised through a residential campus model in which living, studying, and a substantial part of social life are concentrated around campus space. Dormitories and shared accommodation are central settings for everyday routines and peer relations. Many Chinese public universities also have relatively clear physical boundaries, including enclosed campus layouts and managed entry (Sun et al., 2018). This does not mean that students cannot leave campus. Rather, it indicates that campus life is organised through material arrangements that shape movement, routine, and access to facilities. At the same time, digital connectivity means that being physically on campus does not imply being disconnected from people and resources elsewhere. Everyday engagement may therefore be campus-based while also extending beyond the campus through mobile and networked technologies.

The evaluative environment of undergraduate life also extends beyond formal coursework and grades alone. In Chinese higher education, some forms of co-curricular participation are increasingly formalised, recorded, and recognised. A well-known example is the “Second Classroom Transcript” system, introduced through a joint policy document issued by the Communist Youth League of China and the Ministry of Education. This framework proposes that students’ participation in activities such as volunteering and public service, arts and sports projects, innovation and entrepreneurship, internships and practical training, and skills development be systematically recorded and evaluated. It also states that these records can be used in processes such as comprehensive student assessment, awards, postgraduate recommendation, and other selection procedures (Communist Youth League of China Central Committee & Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2018). This point is included here not to develop a separate argument about policy in itself, but to indicate that the

landscape of recognition may extend beyond academic grades and that some forms of participation become visible and consequential through broader evaluative arrangements.

Contemporary campus life is also increasingly mediated through digital infrastructures. Research on smart-campus development shows how institutional platforms, data systems, and connected services intersect with student learning and campus life (Cheong & Nyaupane, 2022). Alongside this wider digitalisation, GenAI has begun to feature in students' everyday study practices. Recent research with Chinese undergraduates suggests that GenAI use may be associated with perceived gains in learning productivity and self-efficacy, while also raising concerns about technological dependence (Wang & Yin, 2025; Zhang & Xu, 2025). These developments reinforce the need to understand engagement not as a purely individual attribute or a single observable behaviour, but as something organised across interconnected institutional, spatial, relational, and digital conditions.

These contextual features also shape the research design of the present study. Chinese higher education is large and internally diverse, with substantial regional and institutional variation. Within the practical constraints of doctoral fieldwork, broad multi-site qualitative research is difficult, and it risks introducing institutional differences as confounding factors when the aim is to develop fine-grained accounts of everyday practice. This thesis therefore adopts a single-site, campus-based qualitative design in order to provide an analytically coherent setting while still allowing attention to variation across students. The study is conducted in one Chinese public university that is part of the Double First-Class initiative. However, the thesis does not aim to make claims about Double First-Class universities as a category. Nor is it an institutional evaluation or organisational case assessment. The detailed rationale for site selection and sampling is presented in Chapter 4.

1.4 Research Purposes, Aims, and Questions

Building on the research problem outlined in Sections 1.2 and 1.3, this thesis examines Chinese undergraduate engagement as it is described and organised in everyday campus life. The emphasis is on what students do, how they interpret their engagement in practice, and how that engagement is shaped within the ordinary conditions of university life, rather than on what students ought to do according to a predefined model of “good” engagement.

The purposes of this study are to develop a fine-grained account of how Chinese undergraduates make sense of and enact engagement in their day-to-day university lives, and to examine the conditions through which engagement is shaped, recognised, and made consequential. The focus on undergraduates is important because undergraduate life in Chinese universities is often strongly embedded in campus-based routines, shared residential arrangements, organised teaching, and wider co-curricular expectations. This makes undergraduates particularly well placed for examining engagement as an everyday campus practice across interconnected academic, social, material, and digital settings.

To achieve these purposes, the study pursues three related aims. First, it documents how students describe engagement in everyday practice, including who they engage with, where engagement is organised, and what forms engagement takes across interconnected campus settings. Second, it examines the conditions that shape engagement. Although the language of “enablers” and “barriers” is widely used in engagement research, this thesis does not treat these conditions as fixed variables with stable positive or negative effects. Instead, it approaches them as relational and context-dependent, recognising that the same arrangement may enable some forms of engagement while simultaneously constraining others. Third, it contributes empirically and conceptually to debates on student engagement by offering an account grounded in students’ lived descriptions of campus life in a Chinese higher education context.

These aims are addressed through the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways do students describe their engagement?

-
-
- a) Who do they engage with?
 - b) Where do they engage?
 - c) What forms does the engagement take?

RQ2: What are the enablers and barriers to student engagement?

The terms “enablers” and “barriers” are retained in RQ2 as familiar heuristic terms in the field. However, the analysis does not treat them as fixed or binary categories. Rather, it examines how engagement is shaped through relational and context-dependent conditions in everyday university life.

1.5 Conceptual Orientation

This thesis uses “student engagement” as an analytic term rather than a fixed definition or a benchmark for judging students. It does not begin from the assumption that engagement has one settled meaning that can simply be applied to the present study. Nor does it assume that engagement is self-evidently visible in a narrow set of desirable practices, such as active verbal participation or measurable involvement. Instead, the thesis approaches engagement as something that requires interpretation in relation to students’ own accounts of what they do, who and what they engage with, and how they understand these practices in everyday campus life.

In this sense, the study adopts a critical and contextual orientation to engagement. It recognises that the concept is conceptually unstable and used in different ways across the literature, and therefore avoids treating any single perspective as a universal template (Bryson, 2016; Kahu, 2013; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017). Rather than using engagement as a ready-made category into which student activity is fitted, this thesis treats it as an interpretive object whose meaning depends on context, relations, and practice.

Student engagement is also approached as practice: something enacted in day-to-day university life rather than a stable personal trait or a simple measure of

motivation. It is treated as temporal and situational, potentially shifting across contexts and over time (Coates, 2007). This means that engagement is understood as situated and context-dependent, shaped by the conditions in which it is organised and enacted. Consistent with this orientation, the thesis does not assume in advance what “good” engagement should look like, nor does it treat visible participation as inherently more valuable than quieter forms of study (Gourlay, 2015).

This orientation also treats engagement as object-related. In other words, the meaning of engagement depends partly on what students are engaging with (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). Engagement is therefore not treated as a generic intensity of effort or participation. Instead, the analysis attends to how students’ activities are connected to particular objects and purposes in different situations, including knowledge, tasks, people, opportunities, and wider university arrangements. This is important because the same practice may take on different meanings depending on what it is directed towards.

Finally, the thesis remains open to the role of non-human actors and material conditions in the organisation of engagement. Students’ engagement is not understood only through relations with teachers, peers, and institutions, but also through relations with spaces, technologies, digital platforms, artefacts, and routines that shape what can be done in practice (Gourlay & Oliver, 2016). At the same time, the study treats the conditions shaping engagement as relational and context-dependent rather than as fixed variables with stable effects. This conceptual orientation prepares the ground for the two theoretical lenses developed in Chapter 3, which provide more specific resources for interpreting engagement as lived practice and for analysing the conditions through which it is shaped, recognised, and made consequential.

1.6 Overview of the Theoretical Lenses

This thesis adopts two complementary theoretical lenses: a sociomaterial lens and a Foucauldian lens on power, discipline, and governmentality. A single theoretical lens would be insufficient to capture both how engagement is

organised in students' day-to-day campus life and how it is shaped, recognised, and made consequential within wider institutional and evaluative arrangements. For this reason, the study draws on two lenses that address different but related dimensions of the research problem.

The sociomaterial lens primarily supports RQ1. It treats engagement as something enacted in practice through relations among people, artefacts, spaces, temporal routines, and organisational arrangements, rather than as a purely individual attribute or a pre-defined category of behaviour (Fenwick et al., 2011; Gourlay, 2015; Latour, 2005). This lens is especially useful for examining who students engage with, where engagement is organised, and what forms it takes in everyday campus life. It also keeps the analysis open to quieter and less visible forms of engagement, as well as to the role of non-human actors such as digital tools, platforms, and material settings in shaping practice.

The Foucauldian lens mainly supports RQ2. It directs attention to how engagement is shaped through norms, classification, evaluation, and wider institutional arrangements, rather than treating it as a matter of individual choice alone or assuming that conditions operate as simple external causes (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1977, 1991). This lens is useful for examining how some forms of engagement become more visible, more valued, and more consequential than others, and how this happens through assessment, documentation, comparison, and routine practices of normalisation. It also supports a non-binary reading of "enablers" and "barriers", recognising that the same arrangement may open recognised opportunities while at the same time narrowing what counts as legitimate engagement.

These two lenses are not used as competing explanations, but as complementary analytic resources. The sociomaterial lens supports description of engagement as lived and enacted practice in everyday campus life, while the Foucauldian lens supports interpretation of how these practices are conditioned, recognised, and made consequential within institutional and evaluative arrangements. Analytically, the thesis distinguishes between practice and

conditions, while recognising that they are intertwined in lived experience and are not always neatly separable in students' accounts.

The lenses are used as sensitising concepts rather than as a fixed theoretical system applied in full (Blumer, 1954). This means that the analysis remains grounded in participants' accounts while drawing on conceptual resources to interpret both the organisation of engagement and the conditions shaping it. Governance and evaluative orientations are treated as background conditions at this stage; their implications for student engagement are analysed later through dialogue between existing scholarship and the empirical material. Chapter 3 develops these lenses in full, and the later chapters draw on them to interpret participants' accounts of engagement in everyday campus life.

1.7 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a hermeneutic-phenomenological orientation, using semi-structured interviews to explore how Chinese undergraduates make sense of and enact engagement in day-to-day campus life. The design is intended to generate rich accounts of everyday practice and interpretation, rather than to test predefined indicators or evaluate students against a normative model of "good" engagement.

The research was conducted in one Chinese public university, pseudonymised as X University. The site is a comprehensive university located in central China and is part of the Double First-Class initiative. It recruits students nationally and includes a wide range of disciplinary fields. In addition, its collegiate system provides an organisational layer beyond academic departments through which undergraduate life is structured. This involves not only accommodation, but also aspects of co-curricular activity, support, and everyday community organisation. For the purposes of this study, the site is treated not simply as a geographical location, but as a material, organisational, and digital environment within which students' everyday engagement is enacted. This thesis does not treat Double First-Class universities as a category to be represented, nor does it present the site as an institutional evaluation or organisational case assessment. Rather, the

site provides an analytically coherent setting for developing a fine-grained account of everyday engagement practice.

The study focuses on undergraduates across Years 1 to 4. This focus reflects both the research aims and the nature of undergraduate life in Chinese universities, where study, residence, peer relations, and many organised activities are commonly structured around campus-based routines. Within this shared setting, participant recruitment and sampling were designed to maximise diversity. Recruitment began through open invitations posted on student-run social media platforms, followed by purposive selection to reduce over-representation of particular groups and broaden the sample. Snowball sharing through participants' networks was later used to reach students beyond the initial response pool. In total, 40 undergraduates were recruited, with efforts made to ensure diversity in year of study, gender, disciplinary background, and student origin.

All interviews were conducted one-to-one in Mandarin via voice calls and audio-recorded with consent. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in Chinese. Data were coded and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis in an iterative manner, supported by NVivo 12 and informed by Braun and Clarke's approach. The transcripts remained in Chinese during analysis, while coding and memo-writing were undertaken flexibly in both Chinese and English before key analytical terms were standardised in English for the thesis. Ethical approval was obtained from Lancaster University, and procedures were followed throughout to support qualitative rigour and participant confidentiality. A fuller account of the philosophical positioning, site selection, participant recruitment, pilot study, data collection, data treatment, trustworthiness, and ethics is provided in Chapter 4.

1.8 Contributions and Significance of the Study

Student engagement is widely used in higher education, yet it is not a settled object of research or practice. Building on this premise, this thesis makes four contributions to scholarship on student engagement. First, it makes an empirical contribution by providing a fine-grained, campus-based account of how Chinese

undergraduates describe and enact engagement in everyday university life. Rather than approaching engagement through predefined indicators or bounded educational settings alone, the study examines who students engage with, where engagement is organised, and what forms it takes across the interconnected settings of campus life. In this way, it adds to existing research by bringing everyday practice more clearly into view.

Second, it makes an analytic contribution by examining engagement in relation to the institutional and evaluative arrangements through which participation becomes visible, recognised, and consequential. Although the language of “enablers” and “barriers” is retained because it is widely used in the field, the thesis does not treat these as fixed variables with stable effects. Instead, it analyses shaping conditions as relational and context-dependent, showing how the same arrangement may open some possibilities for engagement while narrowing others.

Third, the thesis makes a conceptual contribution by treating student engagement as an interpretive object rather than as a settled benchmark. The literature has often stabilised engagement around visible, measurable, and institutionally recognisable forms of participation. In contrast, this study approaches engagement as a fluid, situated, and object-related practice whose meaning depends on what students are engaging with and how engagement is organised in context. It also extends analysis beyond human-centred and participation-biased framings by attending to how engagement is organised through relations among people, spaces, artefacts, technologies, and routines.

Fourth, the thesis makes a methodological contribution by demonstrating the value of a single-site, hermeneutic-phenomenological qualitative study for investigating engagement as a day-to-day campus practice in a Chinese university setting. By maintaining site constancy while allowing variation across students, the study is able to develop a context-sensitive account of engagement within a relatively coherent institutional, spatial, and digital environment.

These contributions matter academically because they bring everyday campus practice and context-sensitive interpretation into dialogue with dominant indicator-led approaches in engagement research. They also have practical relevance by highlighting how institutional and evaluative arrangements shape what counts as engagement in practice, with implications for how universities design participation opportunities and interpret evidence of “engagement”.

1.9 Thesis Structure

This thesis is organised into eight chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study, outlines the research problem, situates the study in the context of contemporary Chinese higher education, and presents the research purpose, aims, questions, conceptual orientation, theoretical lenses, research design, and contributions. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on student engagement, tracing the development of dominant research traditions, key conceptual debates, and methodological tendencies, with particular attention to the Chinese higher education context and to the gaps addressed by the present study. Chapter 3 sets out the two theoretical lenses and explains how a sociomaterial lens and a Foucauldian lens are used as complementary analytic resources for interpreting engagement as everyday practice and analysing the conditions through which it is shaped and recognised. Chapter 4 outlines the study methodology, including the philosophical positioning, research design, interview method, research site, participant sampling and recruitment, pilot study, data collection, data treatment, and procedures for trustworthiness and ethics.

The findings are presented in two chapters. Chapter 5 provides an overview of the ecology of student engagement in everyday campus life, addressing RQ1 by examining who Chinese undergraduates engage with, where engagement is organised, and what forms it takes across interconnected settings. Chapter 6 focuses on the conditions shaping engagement, addressing RQ2 by examining how institutional and evaluative arrangements shape, enable, and constrain engagement in relational and context-dependent ways. Chapter 7 discusses the findings in relation to the literature and the theoretical lenses, drawing out the broader interpretations and implications of the study. Chapter 8 concludes the

thesis by summarising the main findings, reiterating the study's contribution, and outlining implications, limitations, and possibilities for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Overview

This chapter reviews the literature relevant to the present study. It first traces the historical roots of student engagement and the rise of survey-based engagement research. It then examines the conceptual complexity of student engagement, including mainstream understandings, their strengths and limitations, and alternative and complementary perspectives. The chapter next considers broader research landscapes, empirical tendencies, and what remains less visible in existing studies. It then turns to student engagement in Chinese higher education, focusing on how the concept has been introduced, adapted, and studied, as well as what remains underexplored in the Chinese literature. The chapter concludes by synthesising the main insights from the review, identifying the key research gaps, and clarifying the implications for the present study.

2.2 Historical Roots and the Rise of Survey-Based Engagement Research

2.2.1 Conceptual Foundations of Student Engagement

Student engagement did not emerge as a single, settled concept. Instead, it developed gradually through a series of related constructs concerned with what students do, how they experience university, and how these experiences relate to learning, development, and persistence in higher education (Gao et al., 2022). In this sense, the contemporary language of student engagement has a genealogy rather than a single point of origin. As several reviewers note, the roots of engagement research can be traced to longstanding attempts in North American higher education to understand the “whole college experience” and to examine how students’ activities and institutional environments shape educational outcomes over time (Axelson & Flick, 2010; Bryson, 2014; Kuh, 2009). As Kuh (2009, p. 6) observed, the engagement premise has been in the literature for more than seventy years, although the meaning of the construct has evolved over time; key building blocks in this genealogy include:

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- Time on task (Tyler, 1930s)
 - Quality of effort (Pace, 1960s–1970s)
 - Student involvement (Astin, 1984)
 - Social and academic integration (Tinto, 1987, 1993)
 - Outcomes (Pascarella, 1985)
 - Good practices in undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987)
 - Student engagement (Kuh et al., 1991; Kuh et al., 2005)

One of the earliest influences was the work of the educational psychologist Ralph Tyler, who, in the 1930s, examined the amount of time students spent on their work and attempted to demonstrate its impact on learning (Axelson & Flick, 2010). This was followed by Robert Pace, a psychologist whose work focused on evaluation, measurement, and testing. In the 1970s, drawing on his own research, Pace advanced the construct of quality of effort, arguing that students gain more when they invest more time and energy in educationally purposeful activities such as studying, engaging in substantive interaction with peers and faculty, and applying learning to concrete situations and tasks (Kuh, 2009). Pace (1998) suggested that some educational processes and tasks are more beneficial than others in supporting learning goals. For example, a student who studies for an exam mainly just before the exam (“cramming”) is likely to learn less than one who studies throughout the term and who reads related materials and discusses concepts or ideas from a course with friends and instructors (Chen et al., 2008).

Influenced by Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives, Pace developed a scale of learning activities roughly parallel to the levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, called the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), first administered in 1979 (Pace, 1998). CSEQ was based on the concept of quality of effort and asked students to report the frequency of their participation in educational activities. All items on the scales were simple, direct statements about an activity, so that students completing the survey would know immediately whether they had engaged in the activity and how frequently they had done so (Chen et al., 2008). Pace (1998) states that the concept of quality of effort is operational rather than theoretical. He argued that quality of effort is distinct from

motivation and persistence, although it includes elements of each. In this account, quality of effort reflects initiative, namely, the strength and scope of the personal investment a student makes in their own education. Importantly, student effort does not exist in a vacuum. Colleges and universities play an important role in promoting engagement. Quality of effort is relative to a specific environmental context, “and its strength probably depends on [that] context” (Pace, 1998, p. 31).

In the mid-1970s, Alexander Astin extended the quality-of-effort tradition through his theory of involvement, which highlighted the importance of student involvement for learning and development (Kuh, 2009). As he was writing *Preventing Students from Dropping Out* (Astin, 1975), he sought to make sense of what initially appeared to be many disconnected data points on students’ withdrawal from college. Astin (1975) recognised that undergraduate students’ degree attainment was positively affected by several seemingly unrelated factors, including participation in co-curricular activities, having a part-time job on campus, participating in an honours programme, and so on. Degree attainment (or persistence) was also negatively associated with activities such as commuting and working full-time off campus.

Bringing together these apparently disparate data points led Astin to the concept of involvement, which later became highly influential in what would eventually develop into engagement research. Astin (1984) proposed that greater involvement led to better learning and development; thus, institutions and staff should focus on creating conditions that foster student involvement in educationally meaningful activities. Like Pace, Astin acknowledged that involvement resembled motivation, but he distinguished the two by arguing that motivation is a psychological state whereas involvement connotes behaviour (Chen et al., 2008). Astin’s work on student involvement in the 1980s is widely regarded as a major precursor to later research on student engagement (Axelson & Flick, 2010).

Building on previous research, the emerging focus on what students do in higher education was strengthened further by work on student outcomes, integration, and effective educational practice. Pascarella (1985) developed a general causal

model that specified how pre-college characteristics, institutional structure and environment, students' interactions, and quality of effort jointly shape a broad range of collegiate outcomes (cognitive, affective, attitudinal). This framework shifted attention from static inputs to what students experience and do in college (e.g. informal contact with faculty, peer interaction), providing a testable pathway from environment to experience/effort and to outcomes. Moreover, Tinto's theory of student departure added a clear mechanism that links what students and institutions do to student success: everyday academic and social experiences foster academic and social integration; integration strengthens commitment to personal goals and to the university, thereby increasing persistence (Tinto, 1993). Chickering and Gamson's (1987) Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education synthesised evidence-based practices: encourage contacts between students and faculty; develop reciprocity and cooperation among students; use active learning techniques; give prompt feedback; emphasise time on task; communicate high expectations; and respect diverse talents and ways of learning. These seven principles are intended as guidelines for faculty members, students, and administrators, with support from state agencies and trustees, to improve teaching and learning. Together, these contributions moved the field towards a stronger emphasis on the relationship between student activity, institutional practice, and educational quality in higher education.

Taken together, these earlier constructs established several premises that would later underpin research on student engagement. They foregrounded the importance of students' time, effort, participation, and interaction; highlighted the role of institutional conditions in shaping the educational experience; and linked student activity to learning, development, and persistence. At this stage, however, these ideas remained related but distinct, rather than consolidated into a single widely operationalised engagement framework. The next phase of development involved translating these premises into more standardised and operational forms, most notably through the rise of large-scale survey instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

2.2.2 The Rise of NSSE and the Consolidation of Survey-Based Engagement Research

The early constructs discussed above, including time on task, quality of effort, student involvement, social and academic integration, and effective educational practice, laid the foundation for a more standardised engagement framework in higher education. The next stage of development involved translating these ideas into more systematic and operational frameworks. In this process, student engagement became increasingly associated with survey-based measurement and with the production of evidence about students' educational experiences that could be used for institutional evaluation and improvement.

This development was closely related to growing interest in how collegiate quality might be assessed beyond traditional indicators. In the early 1990s, the U.S. Department of Education expressed interest in whether tools existed that could provide institutions with valid and reliable information about the student experience (Ewell & Jones, 1996). However, as is often the case with government-sponsored work, a change in political priorities set this programme aside. Research-led and practitioner-oriented networks within higher education then carried this work forward (Kuh, 2009). In early 1998, Russ Edgerton brought together experts to discuss how to reframe the national dialogue on collegiate quality away from rankings that prioritise institutional resources and reputation, and toward authentic evidence of student learning and effective educational practices. From these discussions emerged the idea that a valid, reliable, widely used survey of student behaviour and experiences could serve as a useful alternative to rankings (Kuh, 2009).

Subsequently, Edgerton asked Peter Ewell to develop an instrument to assess the extent to which students participate in empirically validated effective educational practices and the benefits they gain from their college experience (Kuh, 2001). Ewell assembled a design team, including Alexander Astin, Gary Barnes, Arthur Chickering, John N. Gardner, George Kuh, Richard Light, and Ted Marchese, which spent several months designing this instrument (Kuh, 2009).

NSSE conducted a successful pilot in 1999 and had its first launch in the spring of 2000 (Axelson & Flick, 2010; Kuh, 2009). Importantly, NSSE did not represent a complete conceptual break from earlier research traditions. Kuh (2001) notes that about two-thirds of the original NSSE items were the same as or similar to questions used in the CSEQ. In this sense, NSSE can be understood as the large-scale operationalisation of an already influential line of inquiry.

Kuh explains that the “engagement premise is straightforward and easily understood: the more students study a subject, the more they know about it” (Axelson & Flick, 2010, p. 40). It is echoed in the definition provided by NSSE:

Student engagement represents two critical features of collegiate quality – the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities, and how the institution deploys its resources and organises the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities that decades of research studies show are linked to student learning (NSSE, n.d.).

These formulations were significant because they brought student behaviour and institutional practice together within a single framework. As a result, student engagement was positioned not simply as an individual matter, but also as an issue of institutional design and educational quality.

NSSE translated this premise into a measurable survey framework. Following its inaugural launch in 2000, NSSE has been administered annually in the United States and Canada to examine student engagement through five benchmarks, which were regarded as key components associated with student engagement (Bryson, 2014):

- Level of Academic Challenge: extent to which expectations and assessments challenged students to learn.
- Enriching Educational Experiences: participating in broadening educational activities.
- Active and Collaborative Learning: students’ efforts to actively construct their knowledge.

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- Supportive Campus Environment: the extent to which students perceive the institution as providing support for their learning and development.
 - Student-Faculty Interaction: level and nature of students' contact with teaching staff.

These benchmarks were operationalised through a set of items asking students to self-report their participation in relevant activities or to indicate whether opportunities are available to do so. The survey also includes rating questions about the quality of the environment and services (Bryson, 2014). In this sense, NSSE was intended to provide a useful proxy for institutional teaching and learning quality (Kuh et al., 2007), and its data could be used by faculty and staff to improve the undergraduate experience by design (Kuh, 2009). Consistent with this orientation, NSSE notes that it does not assess student learning directly; rather, survey results point to areas where institutions appear to be performing well and aspects of the undergraduate experience that could be improved at the institutional level (Kuh, 2009).

The survey was later revised as NSSE 2.0 in 2013. The updated version reflected the growing use of information technology and made efforts to clarify and simplify questions and refine the benchmarks. The original five benchmarks were reorganised into ten Engagement Indicators grouped within four themes; in addition, six High-Impact Practices were reported separately (McCormick et al., 2013, p. 11):

- Academic Challenge (Theme 1): higher-order learning; reflective and integrative learning; learning strategies; quantitative reasoning
- Learning with Peers (Theme 2): collaborative learning; discussions with diverse others
- Experiences with Faculty (Theme 3): student-faculty interaction; effective teaching practices
- Campus Environment (Theme 4): quality of interactions; supportive environment
- High-Impact Practices: learning communities; service-learning; research with faculty; study abroad; internships and field experiences; culminating senior experiences

Although the NSSE was revised, its underlying philosophy and purpose remained stable. This stability reflects NSSE's underlying premise that institutions cannot easily change who students are, but that, with appropriate assessment tools, universities can identify areas where improvements in teaching and learning may increase the chances that students attain their educational and personal goals (Kuh, 2009). In the absence of direct measures of student learning in higher education, NSSE aims to provide high-quality, behaviourally oriented data on aspects of the student experience related to learning outcomes and student success, which institutions can use to improve the undergraduate experience. Kuh (2009) also describes broader purposes for NSSE: to build knowledge about effective educational practice through ongoing analysis of annual results, and to promote public acceptance and use of empirically derived conceptions of collegiate quality.

While not everyone will agree with this approach, NSSE linked student activity, institutional practice, and educational quality, and made engagement visible in a form that could be measured, reported, compared, and used for improvement (Kuh, 2001, 2009). Engagement survey data could be used to identify patterns in student participation, highlight areas for intervention, and support institutional reflection on undergraduate teaching and learning (Coates & McCormick, 2014). Moreover, it could be administered to large student populations, generate comparable findings, and provide institutions with results that appeared clear, manageable, and useful for decision-making. In this respect, quantitative engagement research offered what Zepke (2015) describes as a "feeling of certainty" to administrators, politicians, and the wider public.

This institutional appeal was reinforced by the growing emphasis on assessment, accountability, quality enhancement, and demonstrable improvement in higher education (Kuh, 2003, 2009). NSSE gained a dominant position in North America and was later adapted into numerous NSSE-based national surveys worldwide (Coates & McCormick, 2014). One of the best-known examples is the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), developed by Coates, which adapted the NSSE logic for use in Australia and New Zealand. AUSSE similarly defined engagement as students' involvement in activities and

conditions likely to generate high-quality learning, while also recognising the role of institutions and staff in creating those conditions (Coates, 2006, 2007). NSSE-inspired survey instruments have been developed in a range of countries, such as those in Ireland, the UK, Mexico, parts of Africa, South Korea, Japan, and China (Coates & McCormick, 2014).

The widespread use of NSSE and its related instruments increased the public visibility of engagement, and institutional uptake further strengthened the place of student engagement in higher education discourse (Kuh, 2009). Empirical findings worldwide have also reinforced this influential understanding of engagement. Using NSSE data, Kuh et al. (2007) reported significantly positive but modest associations between engagement indicators and outcomes such as grade point averages and retention. Related studies have similarly linked engagement indicators with persistence, progression, and student success more broadly (e.g., Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007; McCormick et al., 2013; Thomas, 2012). These associations do not in themselves establish a simple causal model, nor do they resolve the conceptual ambiguity of engagement. However, they have helped consolidate engagement not only as a survey category, but also as a broader discourse about student learning, teaching quality, and student success (Kuh, 2003, 2009; Zepke, 2014).

Within this broad discourse, Kuh's (2009) definition of student engagement, influenced by the popularity and international uptake of NSSE, has become one of the most cited accounts in the literature: "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (p. 683). Yet Kuh (2009) also cautions that student engagement is complex and that there is still more to learn about it. He stresses the need to avoid misinterpretation or misuse, and to resist treating engagement as a single, one-size-fits-all template. The next section therefore turns to these conceptual issues and multiple perspectives on student engagement.

2.3 Conceptual Complexity and Perspectives on Student Engagement

2.3.1 Conceptual Ambiguity and Definitional Diversity

As Section 2.2 has shown, the rise of NSSE and related survey traditions helped establish student engagement as a prominent term linked to educational quality, student learning, and institutional improvement in higher education (Kuh, 2009). Yet the growing influence of the term did not produce conceptual clarity. Instead, student engagement has remained conceptually ambiguous: its meaning shifts across studies because it is mobilised for different purposes, at different levels of analysis, and within different research traditions (Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2010). Broadly, engagement can refer to how learners participate in educationally purposeful activities, and it is associated with teaching practices, learning outcomes, curriculum development, student satisfaction, and the general student experience (Gao et al., 2022). In this sense, student engagement often functions less as a single construct than as a convenient umbrella term. Ramsden and Callender (2014) capture this variety when they describe student engagement as a convenient expression for almost any desirable form of teaching and learning. This breadth helps explain why the term has travelled easily across policy, practice, and research, but it also makes definitional precision difficult to sustain.

Structuring the diverse interpretations of student engagement is challenging, not least because the literature does not offer an obvious or coherent way of navigating this complexity (Bryson, 2014). Some scholars have suggested different emphases across Anglophone traditions, such as a stronger indicator-oriented focus on participation in parts of the American literature and a greater emphasis on belonging, student experience, and student voice in parts of the UK literature (Bryson, 2014; Solomonides et al., 2012; Thomas, 2012). However, such distinctions should be treated cautiously, since concepts, research instruments, and policy languages travel across contexts and often become hybrid (Yorke, 2016; Zepke, 2018). Variation is therefore better understood as a matter of how student engagement is interpreted, applied, and emphasised in different contexts, rather than as evidence of wholly separate national concepts.

What remains most salient is not a clear national division, but the range of meanings, emphases, and uses attached to student engagement across different studies and contexts.

This diversity is visible not only in the wording of definitions, but also in the objects they prioritise, the dimensions they emphasise, and the ways in which responsibility for engagement is distributed between students and institutions. For example, Kuh et al. (2007) define engagement as “both time and energy students invested in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devoted to effective educational practices” (p. 542). Coates (2006) similarly presents engagement as a joint proposition shaped by both students’ participation and the conditions, opportunities, and expectations provided by institutions and staff, while still positioning students as key agents in the process. Read together, such definitions suggest that engagement is often framed as a shared responsibility rather than as something attributable solely to either students or institutions. Trowler (2010) defines student engagement as follows:

Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience, and reputation of the institution. (p. 3)

At the same time, other accounts broaden the concept beyond participation alone. For instance, Fredricks et al. (2004) suggest that engagement is not just about the “right” behaviours but also involves students’ cognitive investment and emotional commitment to learning. Kahu (2013) likewise argues that the field contains several distinct perspectives, each foregrounding different relationships among students, institutions, practices, and outcomes. Student engagement, then, is not simply defined differently by different authors; it is also built around different assumptions about what counts as engagement in the first place.

The concept is further complicated by the fact that its different dimensions do not always align neatly. Trowler (2010) illustrates this point by showing that behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of engagement may diverge

within the same student experience. A student may, for example, skip lectures because the course content feels insufficiently challenging, while at the same time working enthusiastically on more demanding material elsewhere. In such a case, the student may appear behaviourally disengaged in one setting, but remain emotionally and cognitively engaged in learning. This example is important because it highlights a broader conceptual problem: engagement cannot always be inferred directly from visible participation, attendance, or compliance. What appears as non-engagement from one angle may involve a more complex educational relationship when viewed from another.

Given this diversity, many scholars have raised concerns about definitional problems in the field. Axelson and Flick (2010) describe the concept as “theoretically messy” (p. 41), while Trowler (2010), after reviewing more than 1,000 publications, describes the literature as “chaotic” and “a mixed bag” (p. 9). Kahu (2013) identifies one persistent problem as the lack of distinction between engagement itself, the factors that influence it, and its immediate and longer-term consequences. In other words, the literature often blurs the boundaries between antecedents, engagement itself, and outcomes. Bryson (2014) similarly notes that searching for student engagement does not consistently yield conceptually focused work, partly because some relevant studies do not use the term at all, while others use it broadly and imprecisely without conceptual clarification. This makes it difficult to filter and organise the literature and underlines the need for careful conceptual work.

A further source of ambiguity lies in the different analytical levels at which the term is used. Student engagement research operates across different levels within higher education (Kahu et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2017; Zepke, 2024). At the macro level, engagement may function as a policy discourse associated with national priorities, accountability, quality, and the political economy of higher education. At the meso level, institutions translate these agendas into local strategies through curriculum design, quality assurance, student support, and improvement initiatives. At the micro level, engagement research often focuses on teaching and learning, examining students’ situated practices and experiences at the educational interface. These levels are related, but they are

not interchangeable. Although some definitions have gained support, no single definition can capture the full range of perspectives and levels through which student engagement is studied (Zepke, 2024). The point, therefore, is not to pursue one universally accepted definition, but to recognise the concept's complexity and the different purposes it serves in higher education.

For these reasons, this thesis does not attempt to identify one final definition of student engagement and treat it as settled. The point is not to eliminate conceptual diversity, but to recognise that the field has developed through multiple, overlapping, and sometimes competing uses of the term. At the same time, not all understandings of student engagement have carried equal weight in the literature. Some have become more visible and influential than others, especially those associated with participation, institutional improvement, student success, and survey-based measurement. Thus, the next section treats the mainstream not as self-evident, but as something that must itself be examined.

2.3.2 Mainstream Understandings of Student Engagement

Given the conceptual breadth of student engagement, the mainstream can be used as a practical starting point. It is neither possible nor necessary to synthesise all scholarship that may be relevant to engagement. In this thesis, the mainstream does not refer to a single school of thought, or simply to the most common definition in numerical terms. Rather, it refers to those understandings of student engagement that have become especially visible, widely cited, and influential in higher education research, policy, and institutional discourse. They are treated here as mainstream not because they are conceptually uniform, but because they have helped shape how engagement is defined, measured, discussed, and put into practice. In practice, this includes understandings of engagement closely linked to participation, student success, institutional improvement, quality enhancement, and forms of engagement that can be recognised, supported, and often measured or assessed. At the same time, the mainstream is not a single or internally consistent tradition. Different scholars identify it in different ways, depending on what they take to be the central issue at stake.

Kahu's (2013) synthesis provides one important starting point. Rather than identifying a single dominant definition, she maps four dominant perspectives in the engagement literature: the behavioural perspective, which foregrounds student behaviour and institutional practice; the psychological perspective, which defines engagement as an individual psycho-social process; the socio-cultural perspective, which highlights the role of the socio-political context; and, finally, the holistic perspective, which takes a broader view of engagement. This framework is useful here because it shows that the field is already internally differentiated. At the same time, it also helps explain why some understandings have become especially influential. In higher education, behavioural understandings have been particularly prominent because they foreground observable student activity alongside institutional practice and align readily with quality enhancement agendas and survey operationalisation. Kahu's (2013) framework is therefore important not because it identifies a single mainstream, but because it helps locate the survey tradition reviewed in Section 2.1 as one influential strand within a wider conceptual field.

Zepke (2015, 2018) develops this point further by showing that mainstream engagement research is broader than a single behavioural or measurement-based strand. His account suggests that influential mainstream work includes both an indicator-oriented emphasis on measurable forms of participation and a broader concern with belonging, support, connection, and student success. On this reading, the mainstream is not simply a technical project of measurement. It also includes more developmental understandings of how students are connected to learning and institutional life. This broader understanding is important because it avoids presenting the mainstream as reducible to survey logic alone. What links these strands is their shared association with the quality of teaching and learning, student success, and institutional improvement. Zepke's (2015, 2018) account is therefore important because it shows that the mainstream cannot be reduced to measurement alone.

A more concrete example of how mainstream engagement is organised and operationalised can be found in Coates's (2006, 2007) work. His contribution is useful here not only because he offers a definition of engagement, but because

he shows how it can be classified, structured, and translated into forms that are legible for institutional interpretation and application. Coates (2006) frames engagement as a joint proposition shaped by both students' participation and the conditions, opportunities, and expectations provided by institutions and staff, while still emphasising students as key agents. To represent the multidimensional phenomenon of engagement, Coates (2007) identifies four student engagement styles located along two axes (academic and social):

Intense: students reporting an intense form of engagement are highly involved with their university study. ... [They] see themselves as active, motivated and imaginative learners who collaborate with others in and beyond class, participate in broadening activities around campus, and initiate communication with staff. They tend to see teaching staff as approachable and to see their learning environment as responsive, supportive and challenging. (pp. 132-133)

Collaborative: students reporting a collaborative style of engagement tend to favour the social aspects of university work and life ... High levels of general collaborative engagement reflect students feeling validated within their university communities, particularly by participating in broad beyond-class talent development activities and interacting with staff and other students. (p. 134)

Independent: an independent style of engagement is characterised by a more academically and less socially oriented approach to study. ... Students reporting an independent style of general engagement see themselves as participants in a supportive learning community. They see staff as being approachable, as responsive to student learning needs, and as encouraging and legitimating student reflection, and feedback. These students tend to be less likely, however, to work collaboratively with other students within or beyond class, or to be involved in enriching events and activities around campus. (pp. 133-134)

Passive: students whose response styles indicate passive styles of engagement rarely participate in the online or general activities and conditions linked with productive learning. (p. 134)

Coates (2007) is careful to clarify that these styles are not enduring student types, but temporary states of engagement. This is important because it foregrounds the temporal and multidimensional character of engagement, rather than treating it as a fixed trait. The definition and typology proposed by Coates (2007) have also been influential in wider survey-based discussion of student engagement internationally. In this sense, his work is especially relevant because it shows how engagement can move beyond abstract definition and into classification, measurement, and institutional use.

Gourlay (2015, 2017) identifies the mainstream in a somewhat different way. Rather than mapping perspectives or strands, she draws attention to the participation-centred character of dominant engagement discourse. In this discourse, engagement is readily equated with participation, and valuable participation is often imagined in visible, verbal, interactive, and publicly recognisable forms. Such assumptions can make certain forms of engagement appear more desirable than others, while quieter, textual, solitary, or less immediately displayable practices are more easily overlooked or treated as lower-value forms of academic activity. Her analysis is therefore useful here because it suggests that the mainstream is shaped not only by survey measurement, but also by a broader discourse in which certain forms of participation are more readily recognised as legitimate than others. In this sense, Gourlay helps to identify an important feature of mainstream engagement discourse rather than offering an alternative mainstream model. This point is especially important for the present study because it shows that the mainstream is not simply a measurement tradition, but also a normative account of what counts as desirable student practice.

Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) identify another important aspect of mainstream engagement discourse: its entanglement with effectiveness, quality assurance, performativity, and managerial agendas within contemporary higher

education. From this perspective, student engagement is not simply a descriptive educational concept, but also part of a broader effectiveness-focused movement in which engagement is expected to contribute to improvement, retention, satisfaction, and institutional performance. In such a context, engagement becomes a normative and strategic discourse through which desirable forms of student conduct are encouraged, monitored, and evaluated. Their contribution is useful here not because they provide another mainstream model, but because they help clarify what mainstream engagement has increasingly come to emphasise. On this reading, engagement is closely connected to wider agendas shaped by marketisation, accountability, and institutional performance.

Although these scholars identify the mainstream in different ways, they are not describing entirely separate phenomena. Their accounts overlap in important respects. First, all point, in different ways, to the visibility and influence of particular understandings of engagement in higher education discourse. Second, they connect engagement to desirable educational outcomes, such as learning, belonging, student success, persistence, and quality enhancement. Third, they recognise that institutions matter, whether through teaching practices, support, opportunities, curriculum design, or wider learning environments. Fourth, they tend to treat engagement as something that can be identified, supported, improved, and often operationalised for institutional assessment and enhancement. The mainstream is therefore best understood not as a single doctrine, but as a group of influential understandings that share important features.

2.3.3 Strengths, Limitations, and Critiques of Mainstream Student Engagement

The mainstream understandings discussed above have become influential for several important reasons. Their prominence cannot be explained solely by policy circulation or institutional uptake. Mainstream understandings have also become influential because they provide higher education with practical, evidence-informed, and institutionally useful ways of thinking about teaching,

learning, and student success (Zepke, 2015, 2018). In this sense, mainstream engagement has become influential not simply because it is measurable or policy-friendly, but because it appears to offer workable ways of understanding what supports learning and what institutions can do in response (Coates, 2006; Kuh, 2009). Accordingly, this section does not treat the mainstream as self-evidently correct. Rather, it examines why these understandings have proved so powerful, what they have contributed, and where their limitations and points of critique become visible.

One major strength of mainstream engagement lies in its practical educational value. It provides higher education with a practical language for discussing teaching, learning, support, and success (Coates, 2006; Kuh, 2009; Zepke, 2015). In much mainstream work, engagement is closely associated with quality teaching and learning and with successful student outcomes. Zepke (2015) explicitly characterises the mainstream in these terms, describing it as a view in which engagement functions as a generic indicator of quality learning, quality teaching, and student success. It has helped make teaching and learning more discussable and more open to improvement through a shared vocabulary of practices and conditions. Even when definitions differ, engagement discourse often directs attention to the relationship between students' time and effort and the institutional practices that enable or inhibit learning (Trowler, 2010). This framing has value because it shifts attention away from static inputs alone and towards what students do, what teachers do, and what kinds of conditions appear to support learning (Kuh et al., 2007). It has also helped make teaching and learning more visible and more open to improvement by linking participation to broader concerns such as belonging, achievement, persistence, and educational quality in higher education (Thomas, 2012; Zepke, 2015).

A second educational strength is that mainstream engagement does not treat learning as purely individual. Mainstream accounts also suggest that engagement requires institutional support (Zepke, 2018). Across the influential definitions presented above, engagement is usually understood to involve both student activity and institutional or pedagogical support. This can be seen in Kuh's (2009) emphasis on educationally purposeful activities and effective

educational practice, in Coates's (2006) understanding of engagement as a joint proposition, and in Thomas's (2012) work on belonging and student success. It therefore offers a way of understanding learning as shaped not only by student effort but also by the opportunities, expectations, and conditions provided by institutions. For this reason, mainstream engagement has often been useful in discussions of teaching enhancement, student support, and institutional responsibility (McCormick et al., 2013). Importantly, mainstream engagement can also recognise influences from outside the classroom, such as paid work, financial pressures, family responsibilities, and students' wider cultural and socio-economic circumstances (Zepke, 2018). However, these influences are often incorporated as factors affecting participation, success, or support, rather than as the basis for a fuller socio-cultural or political account of engagement.

A further strength lies in the institutional usefulness of engagement. Because engagement can be translated into evidence, indicators, and enhancement agendas, it travels readily into quality work, benchmarking, comparison, and evaluation. This institutional usefulness helps explain why the concept has become so durable. It offers institutions ways of identifying strengths and weaknesses, reflecting on their provision, and making visible aspects of the student experience that might otherwise remain diffuse or hard to discuss (Coates, 2007; Kuh, 2009; McCormick, 2009; McCormick et al., 2013). In this sense, mainstream engagement is not only educationally meaningful but also institutionally understandable and usable. It can support reflective accountability and provide a common language through which institutions discuss improvement. Survey traditions have been especially influential here because they make engagement visible in forms that are comparable, reportable, and actionable, even if those forms are always partial.

The strengths of mainstream engagement also extend beyond teaching quality and student success in a narrow sense. In addition to its educational and institutional uses, mainstream engagement has been associated with broader concerns such as belonging, well-being, co-production, and citizenship (Field, 2009; McMahon & Portelli, 2004). This broader scope helps explain why the concept has proved so durable. It can speak not only to teaching and learning,

but also to wider questions of participation, support, and student development. As Zepke (2018) argues, this breadth is one reason why mainstream engagement has acquired such durability and legitimacy in higher education discourse.

Mainstream engagement has also become influential because it has been repeatedly associated with a wide range of desirable outcomes for both students and institutions. In addition to academic achievement, persistence, and student success, the literature has linked engagement to belonging, well-being, personal development, deep learning, and wider forms of participation and citizenship (Field, 2009; McMahon & Portelli, 2004; Trowler, 2010; Zepke, 2018). This breadth has strengthened the legitimacy of engagement discourse in higher education because it allows engagement to appear not only educationally useful but also widely beneficial. In this sense, the mainstream has become durable not simply because it is measurable or institutionally convenient, but because it appears to offer a persuasive way of linking student activity, institutional practice, and desirable educational and developmental outcomes.

At the same time, these strengths help explain why critique of mainstream engagement has often remained muted. Because engagement appears self-evidently positive, practically useful, and publicly legitimate, it can become difficult to question without seeming to reject student success or good teaching itself. Zepke (2018) makes this point directly when he suggests that student engagement has, in some respects, become an uncritically accepted orthodoxy in higher education. This marks an important move in the literature from emphasising the strengths of mainstream engagement to subjecting its assumptions and limits to more explicit critique. The mainstream is powerful not only because it offers useful educational and institutional tools, but also because its value often appears morally and politically self-evident. Yet it is precisely these same qualities that generate important limitations.

One recurring limitation is that mainstream approaches can become too generic and too closely tied to what is practical and easily measured. Zepke (2015) explicitly identifies a one-size-fits-all tendency in mainstream engagement

research, arguing that such work may overlook disciplinary, cultural, socio-economic, and emotive diversity. A related methodological issue is that mainstream engagement research has often relied on cross-sectional survey designs, self-report indicators, and variable-based modelling. Such approaches are useful for identifying broad patterns, but they are less able to capture engagement as fluid, relational, and shaped through context, objects, and everyday arrangements (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Bryson, 2016; Coates, 2007). Gourlay (2015) and Zepke (2015) also criticise the preference for pedagogies that are practical and easily measured, while deeper philosophical questions about curriculum and educational purpose are neglected.

A related limitation is that mainstream engagement research often assumes the value of the activities and tasks it seeks to promote, without sufficiently questioning what makes them educationally worthwhile in the first place. McArthur (2023), in her critique of authentic assessment, sharpens this point by arguing that performing a task does not mean very much unless there is a basis for establishing that the task is worth doing. This is important because it moves the discussion beyond participation or task completion alone to questions of educational purpose, value, and social worth. It also suggests that assessment should not be treated simply as a technical mechanism for measuring performance, but as a practice shaped by judgements about what kinds of activity are worthwhile and why. Generic frameworks and standardised instruments may therefore compress variation, ambiguity, and context into categories that are easy to use for reporting and intervention. While such tools can be useful, they risk producing a simplified account of teaching and learning that does not adequately capture the complexity of situated engagement (Axelson & Flick, 2010; Gourlay, 2015; Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Zepke, 2015).

A further limitation lies in the conceptual and theoretical unsettledness of the field, as discussed in Section 2.3.1 (Kahu, 2013). This becomes especially problematic in mainstream work, where engagement can appear simultaneously as a state, a process, an activity, a set of indicators, and a sign of educational quality. Mainstream literature often proceeds as if the construct were sufficiently settled for intervention, despite continued conceptual instability. Macfarlane and

Tomlinson (2017) are especially clear on this point. They describe student engagement as a nebulous and contentious term marked by conceptual confusion and methodological weakness. As they note, much engagement research is heavily influenced by cause-and-effect framing and a focus on effectiveness, often assuming that particular interventions will generate identifiable gains in student achievement, retention, or participation. They also point to under-theorisation, weak longitudinal evidence, and an overreliance on studies designed to demonstrate what works. A related issue is that mainstream accounts often assume rather than specify what students are engaging with, leaving the object of engagement unclear (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015).

The limitations of the mainstream are therefore not only technical. They also concern what kinds of participation and student practice are normalised or even encouraged. Gourlay's work is especially important here because it highlights the visibility bias built into much dominant engagement discourse. When engagement is imagined primarily through visible, verbal, interactive, and publicly recognisable participation, quieter, textual, solitary, and less observable forms of academic work can be overlooked or devalued (Gourlay, 2015, 2017). This is not simply a methodological problem; it is also a normative one, because it shapes which practices come to count as legitimate forms of student engagement. Her critique of typologies such as Coates's (2007) is useful here. The issue is not merely that such classifications describe different styles of engagement, but that they may also reproduce implicit hierarchies in which some forms of participation appear naturally more desirable than others. In this way, mainstream engagement discourse can privilege visible and interactional practices while rendering quieter or less publicly displayable forms of study comparatively marginal.

A further point of critique concerns the entanglement of mainstream engagement with managerial and market rationalities. Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) place engagement initiatives within a context of marketisation, rising participation, organisational efficiency, and demands for measurable outcomes. They identify six critiques of the student engagement movement: performativity, marketing, infantilisation, surveillance, gamification, and opposition. This shows that student

engagement is not only an educational concept but also part of a wider discourse in which student conduct is monitored, shaped, and evaluated in line with institutional priorities. In this context, engagement becomes closely tied to institutional performance, reputation, and managerial agendas. What appears educationally benign may therefore also function as a governance language through which desirable student conduct is encouraged, measured, and normalised.

Related critiques connect mainstream engagement to wider debates about marketisation and the student-as-consumer framing in higher education. From this perspective, engagement may be shaped not only by pedagogical and developmental concerns, but also by increasingly instrumental expectations about value, performance, and return on investment (Brooks & Abrahams, 2018; Bunce et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). This does not mean that students can simply be reduced to consumers, or that such framings operate identically across contexts. However, it does suggest that some mainstream engagement agendas are embedded within wider institutional pressures that encourage visible, demonstrable, and strategically useful forms of participation.

Zepke's (2018) critique pushes this point further by arguing that mainstream engagement has an affinity with neoliberal expectations of higher education and that this narrows engagement towards what works in neoliberal times. In this sense, mainstream engagement tends to privilege the structural end of the agency-structure continuum, foregrounding institutional frameworks, support mechanisms, and measurable outcomes, while reducing the role of student agency. This is particularly visible when success is defined too narrowly through persistence, course completion, graduation, and employability. As McMahon and Portelli (2004) argue, such a restricted view of success can produce a narrow and compliant understanding of engagement. Even where concepts such as student voice appear to move the field towards agency, their effects often remain tightly controlled by institutions (Trowler, 2010). What is missing, in Zepke's (2018) terms, is not only greater methodological nuance, but also critique, student agency and democracy, and educational purposes, knowledge, and values that transcend dominant political discourses. Relatedly, the strong influence of

behavioural, cognitive, and emotional meta-constructs can privilege psychology-heavy understandings of engagement while leaving critical perspectives comparatively underdeveloped (Fredricks et al., 2004; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Teo, 2011). As a result, political, sociological, and philosophical concerns risk remaining secondary within mainstream engagement discourse.

Overall, mainstream engagement is best understood as an important but partial body of work. Its strengths help explain why it has become so powerful: it provides practical and institutionally legible ways of linking student activity, institutional conditions, and desirable educational outcomes. Yet these same strengths also create limits. Mainstream engagement can privilege what is generic, practical, measurable, visible, and manageable. It can also become aligned with wider managerial and market-oriented agendas in ways that narrow what engagement is for and what it is allowed to value. Recognising these problems does not require abandoning student engagement as a concept. Rather, it requires treating the mainstream as influential but incomplete, and opening space for broader, more critical, and more context-sensitive ways of understanding engagement. The next section therefore moves beyond the mainstream to consider alternative and complementary perspectives in more detail.

2.3.4 Alternative and Complementary Perspectives Beyond the Mainstream

Although mainstream accounts have contributed important insights into teaching, learning, student success, and institutional responsibility, the preceding discussion has shown that they remain incomplete. Their strengths do not remove the need for broader ways of understanding engagement. In particular, mainstream approaches often leave underexplored the question of what students are engaging with, the role of identity, recognition, and belonging, the significance of quieter and less visible forms of study, and the wider material, spatial, and political conditions through which engagement is shaped (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Gourlay, 2015, 2017; Zepke, 2017). For this reason, it is useful to move

beyond the mainstream, not in search of a single replacement model, but towards a set of alternative and complementary perspectives.

A particularly useful starting point is provided by Ashwin and McVitty (2015), who shift attention from whether students are engaged to what they are engaging with. Their intervention is important because they argue that the object or focus of student engagement is often left undefined in the literature, even though the meaning of engagement changes when the object of engagement changes. This point is especially important for the present study because it helps move the discussion beyond engagement as a generic form of participation. To address this problem, Ashwin and McVitty (2015) distinguish engagement according to what is being formed through it: engagement to form individual understanding, engagement to form curricula, and engagement to form communities. These are analytically distinct, though related, foci of engagement. In their model, curricula build on understanding, and communities build on both understanding and curricula. In this way, their framework re-emphasises student engagement as a knowledge-centred activity, because engagement in curricula and communities depends on students' engagement with disciplinary or professional knowledge. This intervention is especially relevant to RQ1 in this study because it clarifies how different forms, relations, and sites of engagement may take different meanings depending on what students are engaging with. It is therefore particularly useful for a study concerned not only with whether students participate, but also with who and what they engage with, where such engagement is organised, and how its meaning changes across campus settings. They also distinguish between different degrees of engagement, namely consultation, partnership, and leadership. This helps clarify not only what students engage with, but also how far they are able to shape or transform that object. It also provides an analytic bridge to later questions about what is recognised as "good" engagement. Visible participation, for example, may be treated as engagement in itself, or it may be understood as meaningful only insofar as it supports engagement with knowledge, learning practices, curricula, or communities.

Beyond this clarification of the object of engagement, alternative and complementary perspectives are better understood as plural and overlapping, rather than as a single coherent alternative to the mainstream. Zepke's (2017) discussion is useful here because it suggests that student engagement research does not suffer from a lack of theory so much as from the absence of a single integrated understanding. Instead, engagement has been theorised through a range of distinct yet overlapping perspectives, including psychological, psycho-social, socio-cultural, socio-ecological, and socio-political approaches. This point avoids replacing one fixed classificatory map with another, while still acknowledging that different perspectives foreground different dimensions of engagement.

Psychological perspectives draw attention to behaviour, motivation, deep learning, and the emotional and cognitive dimensions of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Psycho-social perspectives focus more explicitly on the interaction between agency and structure, including learning relationships, transition, and the joint roles of students, teachers, curricula, and institutions in shaping engagement (Kahn, 2013; Kift et al., 2010). Socio-cultural perspectives foreground identity, belonging, and the ways students' social positioning shapes their chances of engaging successfully (Thomas, 2002, 2012). Socio-ecological perspectives extend engagement beyond classrooms to wider life contexts, multiple learning sites, and formal, informal, and non-formal spaces of learning (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Socio-political perspectives bring into view questions of power, governance, democracy, and the political purposes of higher education, including both participatory and critical readings of engagement (Carey, 2013; Fuller & Stevenson, 2019; Zepke, 2017).

Across these perspectives, a further tension concerns questions of agency and responsibility. Engagement is often framed as a joint accomplishment shaped by both students' efforts and institutional conditions (Coates, 2006; Kuh, 2009). This is useful because it moves beyond purely individualised accounts of engagement and recognises the roles of teaching, support, and institutional conditions. At the same time, scholarship on engagement also suggests that the language of

shared responsibility is not neutral. It can carry implicit norms about the responsible student and about the forms of conduct institutions seek to encourage, recognise, and reward (Carey, 2013; McMahon & Portelli, 2004; Trowler, 2010). Agency, therefore, is not simply a matter of individual choice or motivation. It also concerns how students' choices are shaped, organised, and valued within particular institutional and social conditions, and how some forms of participation become more legitimate than others (Kahn, 2013; Zepke, 2017). In this sense, engagement is shaped not only by what students decide to do, but also by the expectations, relationships, and forms of recognition through which their actions become meaningful and consequential.

Among these complementary perspectives, Gourlay's (2015, 2017) work is especially important because it challenges the assumption that legitimate engagement is primarily visible, verbal, interactive, and publicly recognisable. Her critique of dominant participation discourse shows that many forms of academic engagement are quieter, more textual, more solitary, and less immediately observable than mainstream models usually allow. Reading, note-making, drafting, reflection, and private study may not register easily within participation-centred framings, yet they remain central to academic work. This perspective matters not simply because it critiques visibility bias, but because it revalues forms of engagement that are often overlooked, pathologised, or treated as deficient. In this way, Gourlay's work opens up a fuller account of everyday academic practice and unsettles the assumption that engagement is best recognised through public interaction alone.

A further complementary direction is offered by sociomaterial work, particularly where engagement is approached through space, technology, and material arrangements rather than through human intention alone. Sociomaterial work extends this discussion by treating space, technology, and material arrangements not simply as context, but as part of how engagement is organised and enacted in practice. This perspective does not reject the importance of students, teachers, or institutions, but questions the tendency to treat objects, technologies, and settings as merely background conditions. Although the importance of learning environments and educational context has long been

recognised in engagement research, sociomaterial work goes further by treating space, technology, and material arrangements not simply as contextual influences, but as constitutive of engagement in practice (Bligh, 2019; Goodyear et al., 2018; Gourlay, 2015). Instead, engagement is understood as emerging through assemblages of people, devices, texts, platforms, and spaces that shape how study is organised and experienced (Gourlay & Oliver, 2016).

This is especially important in contemporary higher education, where students move across lecture rooms, libraries, dormitories, cafés, online platforms, mobile devices, and AI-mediated environments. Sociomaterial perspectives therefore extend the analysis of engagement beyond visible participation and beyond formal settings, drawing attention to the ways engagement is enacted across physical and digital environments in day-to-day practice. These perspectives are particularly relevant to the present study because they support an understanding of campus engagement as hybrid, distributed, and organised through relations among people, artefacts, infrastructures, and spaces.

Taken together, these alternative and complementary perspectives do not simply replace the mainstream. Rather, they make visible dimensions of engagement that mainstream accounts often understate, marginalise, or leave under-theorised. They show that engagement is shaped not only by practices and outcomes, but also by objects, identities, relationships, spaces, technologies, and wider political and cultural conditions. No single research project can examine all aspects of this complex construct. However, starting from a position that recognises its multiple levels, processes, and relations makes it possible to develop a deeper understanding of one dimension without denying the importance of others (Kahu, 2013). This broader understanding is important for the present study because it supports a more fine-grained exploration of how engagement is lived and described in everyday campus life. It also prepares the ground for the two theoretical lenses developed in the next chapter, where engagement is examined more explicitly as sociomaterial practice and in relation to the institutional and evaluative conditions through which it is recognised and made consequential.

2.4 Research Landscapes, Empirical Tendencies, and What Remains Less Visible

2.4.1 Macro, Meso, and Micro Tendencies in Engagement Research

Empirical research on student engagement spans macro, meso, and micro levels of higher education, but it is not evenly distributed across them. Across the field, the most visible empirical tradition has been quantitative and survey-based, especially in work concerned with institutional comparison, student success, and educational quality. In practice, this literature tends to cluster at two ends. At one end are large-scale, cross-institutional studies that examine engagement through indicators that can be aggregated, compared, and linked to broader outcomes. At the other end are more localised studies conducted within bounded educational settings such as courses, programmes, classrooms, platforms, or specific institutional contexts. What is less visible between these two tendencies is engagement as a day-to-day practice across the interconnected settings of campus life. This broader pattern is also consistent with the practical use of the NSSE tradition itself: NSSE is primarily used for institution-level benchmarking, quality enhancement, and review, rather than for fine-grained analysis of students' engagement in campus life.

At the macro level, engagement is most often made visible through large survey datasets and institutionally useful indicators. Hu and Kuh (2002) examined how student and institutional characteristics were associated with participation in educationally purposeful activities, while Porter (2006) analysed the relationship between institutional structures and student engagement. Carini et al. (2006) and Kuh et al. (2008) extended this line of work by linking engagement to academic performance, grades, and persistence. More recent macro-level studies show that this empirical logic has not remained confined to the early US NSSE tradition. Maloshonok (2024), for example, used undergraduate survey data from the USA, China, and Russia to examine whether associations between student engagement and selected personal characteristics were consistent across national higher education systems, while Korhonen et al. (2024) followed the

same cohort of students across three academic years in all 13 Finnish research-intensive universities and identified engagement profiles linked to study field priorities, withdrawal intentions, and achievement. Taken together, these studies show that macro-level engagement research is especially strong in large-scale comparison, profiling, and institutional utility. At the same time, it tends to treat engagement as a measurable and comparable construct rather than as a lived practice unfolding in context.

At the meso level, empirical research often shifts from broad comparison to institutional programmes, support structures, and organised learning environments. Zhao and Kuh's (2004) study of learning communities is a useful example. Using data from 365 four-year institutions, they found that participation in a learning community was positively linked to engagement, self-reported gains, and overall satisfaction. More recent work continues this tendency, although not always under the explicit label of student engagement. Crawford et al. (2024), using Australian national student experience survey data from 1,159,768 undergraduate and postgraduate students between 2013 and 2019, found that overall educational experience, connections with other students outside class, and support in settling into university were among the strongest predictors of sense of belonging. This line of work is important because it moves beyond narrow individual motivation and shows that institutional arrangements matter. However, the dominant analytic form remains relatively stable: institutional influence is commonly examined through programme participation, support variables, belonging predictors, or survey-based student experience measures. In other words, meso-level research is strong in showing that institutional environments shape engagement-related outcomes, but it is less strong at showing how such arrangements are encountered, negotiated, and woven into the practical flow of students' everyday campus lives.

At the micro level, research becomes more fine-grained, but it also becomes more narrowly bounded. Importantly, micro does not mean only qualitative research. Many micro-level studies are still quantitative or mixed methods, but they are conducted within specific educational settings. Gasiewski et al. (2012), for instance, used a sequential explanatory mixed-method design to examine

academic engagement in introductory science courses, explicitly seeking a richer understanding of the relationship between student engagement and introductory science instruction. Gillen-O'Neel (2021) moved closer to students' everyday experience by asking first- and continuing-generation students to report their sense of belonging and their emotional and behavioural engagement every evening for a week, showing that engagement fluctuated at both person and day levels. More recent studies have developed this localised tendency in digital and mode-specific environments. Vilhunen et al. (2025) examined situational engagement in online climate education courses, while Lipnickas et al. (2025) analysed how course design shaped engagement patterns and performance in a fully online asynchronous environment. Fish et al. (2026) further extended micro-level work beyond the formal course itself by examining students' engagement with employability development opportunities outside the curriculum within a single institutional case. These studies provide richer local detail than broad survey research and begin to show that engagement can vary by task, mode, opportunity structure, and shorter-term experience. Yet they also reveal a recurrent limit: even when research becomes more detailed, it often remains bounded within one course, one programme, one platform, one opportunity structure, or one short temporal window. As a result, the literature is still less likely to examine how students move across lecture rooms, libraries, dormitories, peer networks, digital platforms, and institutional systems in ordinary university life.

The issue, then, is not simply a lack of empirical research on student engagement. Rather, it is the uneven distribution of that research across levels and units of analysis. Macro-level work is strong on large-scale comparison and institutional utility. Meso-level work is strong on programmes, support, and environment. Micro-level work focuses more on local detail, but usually within bounded educational settings. What remains comparatively underexplored is engagement as a day-to-day practice across the interconnected settings of campus life. This matters for the present study because undergraduates' engagement is not lived only at the level of indicators and benchmarks, nor only within one course or one short period of time. It is often organised across multiple spaces, relationships, routines, and systems. The next section therefore turns from the distribution of

engagement research across levels of analysis to the empirical tendencies through which engagement is made visible, and to what they are less able to capture.

2.4.2 How Existing Studies Make Engagement Visible

Empirical tendencies in student engagement research are not neutral. They shape what becomes visible as engagement in the first place, what counts as evidence, and what is more likely to be overlooked. Existing empirical studies do not simply differ by method type, such as quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods research. They also differ in how they operationalise engagement, what units of analysis they privilege, and which aspects of student experience they are able to capture. Across much of the field, quantitative approaches remain especially prominent. However, the dominance of quantitative approaches does not imply uniformity. Some studies define engagement through institutionally oriented indicators of participation and support, some through multidimensional psychological or psycho-educational scales, and others through digital traces of activity. These differences matter because they make some forms of engagement empirically easier to recognise than others.

One influential tendency is survey- and indicator-based research. In this tradition, engagement is commonly made visible through reported participation in educationally purposeful activities, time and effort invested in study, perceived support, interaction with staff and peers, and outcomes such as grades, persistence, gains, satisfaction, or belonging (Carini et al., 2006; Crawford et al., 2024; Hu & Kuh, 2002; Kuh et al., 2007). Studies in this line are especially strong at identifying broad patterns across institutions, subgroups, and outcome measures. They are also well suited to examining how engagement varies in relation to selected predictors, including student characteristics, institutional variables, and reported experiences of support. This is also where the personal-characteristics strand fits most naturally. Studies examining engagement in relation to gender, field of study, year of study, or future plans show how engagement has often been modelled as a measurable variable associated with student-level characteristics (e.g., Hu & Wolniak, 2013; Maloshonok, 2024). Such

work is useful in identifying subgroup patterns, but it tells us more about measurable differences than about how these differences are experienced and negotiated in practice. In this sense, survey logic makes engagement visible as a measurable, comparable, and administratively useful construct. At the same time, this form of visibility is selective. It is less able to capture fragmented, implicit, shifting, or quiet practices that do not fit easily into predefined categories. It also tends to treat conditions shaping engagement as variables, predictors, or subgroup differences rather than as lived and relational arrangements.

A second quantitative tendency is multidimensional scale-based research. Here, engagement is not primarily organised through institutionally oriented indicators, but through psychological or psycho-educational dimensions. A key reference point for this tradition is Fredricks et al.'s (2004) distinction between behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Although this framework emerged in school engagement research, it has been widely borrowed and adapted in later engagement scholarship, including in higher education. This line of work broadens the field in an important way because it makes visible forms of engagement that are not reducible to observable participation alone. Higher education psychometric scales have developed this tendency further by constructing measures tailored more specifically to university settings. Some include dimensions such as teacher–student interaction, self-regulated learning, social or affective engagement, and enjoyment of university life, rather than simply reproducing Fredricks et al.'s original three-part structure (e.g., Zhoc et al., 2019). This means that even within quantitative research, engagement is not being measured in one uniform way. Different scales foreground different dimensions and therefore produce different accounts of what counts as engagement. Yet these instruments still represent engagement through predefined dimensions and psychometric structures. They provide a richer structured representation of engagement, but not a direct account of how students live and organise engagement across the changing settings of campus life.

A third empirical tendency is found in course-, programme-, and pedagogic studies. These studies are often closer to actual teaching and learning processes

than large-scale survey work. They commonly focus on one course, one programme, one pedagogic design, one subject area, or one specific learning task. As a result, they are often better able to show active participation, collaborative learning, teacher practices, and students' responses to particular interventions or curricular designs. Research on learning communities, introductory STEM courses, active learning classrooms, and very large classes illustrates this tendency (Chiu & Cheng, 2017; Exeter et al., 2010; Gasiewski et al., 2012; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Studies of this kind provide richer local detail, but usually within a bounded pedagogical frame. Their strength lies in their ability to show how engagement may vary by discipline, task, teaching practice, or programme structure. Their limitation is that they often stop at the edge of the course or programme being studied. They are less likely to connect what happens inside the formal learning setting with what happens outside it, or to hold together academic and social, formal and informal, physical and digital aspects of engagement within one account. Even where co-curricular or extra-curricular engagement is included, it is still often treated as a bounded activity linked to measurable outcomes rather than as part of a wider ecology of day-to-day university practice (Zacherman & Foubert, 2014).

A fourth tendency is found in digital, online, and blended-learning research. This literature has expanded rapidly, especially in higher education contexts where engagement is examined through discussion forum participation, clickstream data, video use, Learning Management System activity, online interaction, or comparisons between online and offline modes. These studies have moved the field closer to students' actual mediated practices and, in some cases, to short-term or situational fluctuations in activity (Chen et al., 2018; Galikyan & Admiraal, 2019; Lipnickas et al., 2025; Seo et al., 2021; Vilhunen et al., 2025). However, they also have a distinctive visibility bias. Digital studies make mediated activity more visible, but often still within a single platform, task, or course mode. A recent systematic review of higher education learning analytics research found that engagement was overwhelmingly operationalised through observable behavioural measures such as clicks and task duration, while relatively few studies examined multiple dimensions of engagement together (Bergdahl et al.,

2024). In practice, this means that online and offline engagement are often treated as separate domains, or that platform traces are privileged over the broader relationship between digital and physical practices across university life. As a result, these studies may illuminate one mediated environment in considerable detail while still leaving broader questions about engagement across campus life underexplored.

Alongside these more dominant traditions, a relatively smaller but important body of work has widened the empirical field beyond classroom participation alone. This includes studies of learning spaces, student–student and student–teacher relations, and belonging, support, and settlement. Such work is important because it shows that engagement is not simply a matter of participation frequency or task completion. It is also shaped by where students study, how comfortable and supported they feel, and how they relate to peers and teachers. Belonging-oriented studies highlight support, fit, settlement, and connection as important parts of the engagement-related experience (Crawford et al., 2024). Research on social and informal learning spaces is especially important here. Matthews et al. (2011), drawing on an engagement framework adapted from AUSSE, showed that social learning spaces can support peer networks, active and collaborative learning, knowledge-sharing, belonging, and a supportive campus environment. Webb et al. (2008) similarly found that students were more likely to use spaces that were comfortable, easy to control, and supportive of interpersonal communication, and that they valued environments where basic human needs such as eating, drinking, and enjoyment could be integrated with learning. These studies are significant because they make space visible as part of the student experience rather than as simply background.

Gourlay (2015) sharpens this point by arguing that dominant engagement discourse privileges practices that are communicative, public, observable, recordable, and often communal, while quieter, private, non-verbal, and less visible forms of study are more easily overlooked or treated as inferior. Building on this critique, Gourlay and Oliver (2016) show empirically that students' study practices spill across institutional and personal settings and that spaces are not simply containers for learning, but are actively made and remade in practice

through networks of people, devices, texts, and infrastructures. Their examples show students studying on public transport, in cafés, parks, bathrooms, libraries, and bedrooms, often adapting these environments through the use of books, phones, tablets, notes, printers, and Wi-Fi access. Research on online social networking and blended blogging environments likewise draws attention to student–student and student–lecturer interactions as important aspects of engagement within bounded relational settings (Hamid et al., 2015; Lee & Bonk, 2016). These studies begin to widen the empirical field beyond classroom participation alone. However, they often remain largely separate strands. Space studies tend to focus on space, belonging studies on belonging, and relationship studies on interaction. They less often bring these dimensions together within a single account of engagement across the wider ecology of everyday campus life.

Taken together, these methodological patterns do not show that the literature fails to study engagement. Rather, they show that engagement is studied selectively. Existing research is especially good at making visible measurable participation, reported support and belonging, course-based interaction, platform-trace activity, and selected outcomes. It is less good at making visible quiet or solitary engagement, engagement across interconnected settings, engagement that shifts across time and situation, and engagement shaped through arrangements, recognition, and everyday routines rather than through discrete factors alone. Gourlay’s (2015) critique of the “tyranny of participation” is especially important here because it makes clear that what remains less visible is not necessarily unimportant, but is often what dominant empirical framings are least equipped to recognise. The issue, then, is not a lack of empirical work, but that methodological patterns make some forms of engagement empirically easier to recognise than others. For this reason, there remains a need for fine-grained, campus-based qualitative research that can hold together who students engage with, where engagement is organised, what forms it takes, and how it is shaped across day-to-day university life.

2.4.3 Why Fine-Grained Campus-Based Qualitative Research Remains Needed

The preceding discussion does not suggest that student engagement has been neglected in higher education research. On the contrary, the literature is extensive and varied. Large-scale survey studies have generated broad evidence about participation, support, belonging, persistence, and student success; course- and programme-based studies have provided more localised insight into teaching, learning, and intervention; and digital research has brought platform activity and mediated participation into clearer view. Yet the cumulative effect of these traditions is not comprehensive coverage of engagement, but a patterned selectivity. Existing research is generally stronger at identifying measurable participation, bounded interaction, and selected outcomes than at examining engagement as it is lived, negotiated, and organised in day-to-day university life (Tight, 2020).

One reason why further qualitative work remains needed is that much of the literature still approaches engagement through variables, predictors, barriers, or targets for intervention. This has produced valuable findings, but it also encourages a tendency to treat shaping conditions as relatively discrete influences on student behaviour. Research on transition difficulties, belonging, staff interaction, class size, curriculum design, finance, mental health, and support services has shown that engagement is shaped by more than individual motivation. However, these conditions are often analysed as separate factors rather than as interrelated arrangements that students encounter, interpret, and negotiate in practice. Baron and Corbin (2012) sharpen this concern by arguing that ideas about student engagement in university contexts are often fragmented, contradictory, and confused, and that even initiatives intended to increase engagement may contribute to disengagement.

A second reason concerns the limits of dominant participation-centred framings. As Gourlay (2015) argues, mainstream engagement discourse tends to privilege practices that are communicative, public, observable, recordable, and often

communal, while quieter, private, non-verbal, and less visible forms of study are more easily overlooked or positioned as deficient. This critique matters here because it suggests that what is difficult to capture empirically is not necessarily marginal to study, but may be central to it. Reading, note-making, writing, searching, organising materials, and solitary thinking are all integral to academic work, yet they are less readily visible within empirical traditions that privilege observable participation or measurable activity (Gourlay, 2015). Relatedly, Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) argue that student engagement has become increasingly entangled with effectiveness, quality assurance, performativity, and managerial agendas. From this perspective, what becomes visible as engagement is not simply what matters educationally, but also what can be demonstrated, encouraged, monitored, and evaluated within institutional systems. This further reinforces the need for approaches that do not begin from visible participation alone.

A third reason is that important questions about the object of engagement often remain insufficiently addressed in empirical research. Ashwin and McVitty (2015) argue that the meaning of student engagement depends on what students are understood to be engaging with, yet this object is frequently left unspecified in the literature. They distinguish between engagement to form individual understanding, engagement to form curricula, and engagement to form communities, and emphasise that engagement with disciplinary and professional knowledge is foundational to the latter two. This matters because empirical studies that focus primarily on participation frequency, reported support, or selected outcomes may still leave unclear what students' engagement is actually directed towards. For the present study, this limitation is especially important because questions of who students engage with, where engagement is organised, and what forms it takes cannot be adequately understood without also attending to what those engagements are directed towards in practice.

A fourth reason is that student engagement often unfolds across multiple connected settings rather than within one bounded site. Gourlay and Oliver (2016) show empirically that students' study practices spill across institutional and personal settings and that spaces are not merely containers for learning but are

actively made and remade in practice. Their examples show students studying in libraries, bedrooms, cafés, bathrooms, and on public transport, often assembling these sites through devices, notes, printed texts, wireless access, and other infrastructural supports. This is important because it challenges any simple separation between formal and informal, physical and digital, or institutional and personal domains of engagement. It also suggests that research focusing on one course, one classroom, or one platform may still miss how participation is organised across the wider ecology of campus life (Gourlay & Oliver, 2016).

A fifth reason is that some parts of the student engagement landscape remain comparatively underexplored in existing research. Roberts (2018), for example, argues that professional staff play an important role in student retention and success across the student lifecycle, yet this contribution is often less clearly defined and less visible than that of academic staff. This is relevant because student engagement in contemporary universities is shaped not only by teachers, peers, and classroom experiences, but also by support systems, administrative processes, and non-academic roles that structure students' everyday pathways through university. Relatedly, Tight (2019) argues that contemporary student lives extend far beyond course and institution alone, involving family, friends, employment, and leisure, and that understanding what it is like to be a student today requires attention to this broader lived context. Together, these arguments reinforce the case for research that can examine engagement as part of a wider ecology of everyday life rather than as a narrowly bounded educational event.

For the present study, these limitations are important. If engagement is approached only through measurable participation, bounded pedagogic settings, or discrete barriers and supports, then important aspects of undergraduate life risk remaining underexplored. If the object of engagement is left unspecified, then participation may be described without clarifying what students are actually engaging with. If dominant framings privilege what is visible, auditable, and institutionally useful, then quieter, less public, and more routine forms of study are more easily overlooked. What is still needed, therefore, is fine-grained, campus-based qualitative research that can examine how engagement is described and enacted across the interconnected settings of everyday campus

life; how it involves not only formal study but also quieter, routine, and less visible practices; what those practices are directed towards; and how they are shaped by relations among people, spaces, technologies, institutional arrangements, and evaluative conditions. This is particularly important in the context of the present study, where the aim is not to test a predefined model of good engagement, but to develop a contextualised account of who students engage with, where engagement is organised, what forms it takes, and how it is shaped in everyday university life.

2.5 Student Engagement in Chinese Higher Education

2.5.1 Student Engagement as a Borrowed Concept in Chinese Higher Education

In Chinese higher education, student engagement has largely entered the field as an imported rather than an indigenous concept. Its early circulation was closely tied to the translation and adaptation of North American survey traditions, especially the NSSE. NSSE was first introduced to Chinese readers in translation in an English-learning magazine in 2003 (Wildavsky, 2003). It attracted more direct academic attention in 2007, when its significance, benchmarks, and possible relevance to Chinese higher education were formally introduced in a Chinese academic journal (Luo & Chen, 2007). This timing was important. As Chinese higher education expanded rapidly in the 2000s, researchers and policymakers were increasingly concerned with how to assess and improve educational quality beyond enrolment growth, institutional prestige, and resource-based rankings. In this context, NSSE appeared to offer a possible response to debates about how the quality of undergraduate education in China might be assessed and enhanced. Based on NSSE, the Ministry of Education (MoE) began developing a survey adapted to the Chinese context. Initially introduced as NSSE-China, the project was later expanded and developed into the Chinese College Student Survey (CCSS) in 2010 by an interdisciplinary team of researchers at Tsinghua University, including specialists in pedagogy, economics, sociology and psychology (Shi et al., 2014).

However, what entered Chinese higher education was not simply a survey instrument. It was also a conceptual and evaluative framework closely associated with Kuh's (2003) understanding of student engagement. In the account later adopted and discussed by the Tsinghua-based CCSS team, student engagement was understood not merely as student effort, but as the interaction between students and the institutional environment. It referred both to the time and energy students devote to learning and to the policies, activities, and conditions institutions provide to foster such investment (Wang, 2018). This is important because it shows that the introduction of student engagement into Chinese higher education already involved a particular interpretation of the concept, rather than a neutral transfer of terminology.

Yet translating this concept into Chinese and enabling it to take root in local academic and practical discourse was far from straightforward. One of the earliest and most significant challenges was how to understand and translate the core concept of student engagement in the Chinese context. Chinese scholars have not used one single translation consistently. Some translated student engagement directly as “xue sheng tou ru (学生投入)”, which can be translated into English as “student investment”. However, Zhu (2010) argues that while this translation captures the student initiative, it does not easily express the responsibility borne by universities in the learning process. Others translated student engagement as “xue sheng can yu du (学生参与度)”, which can be translated into English as “student involvement degree”. But this version risks underplaying the sense of commitment implied in engagement, while the suffix “degree” also pushes the term towards a more explicitly quantified and indicator-based interpretation. The CCSS team adopted “xue xi xing tou ru (学习性投入)”, which can be translated into English as “learning investment”. In the CCSS team's view, this translation better captures both the student's investment of time and energy in learning and the institution's support for that learning, including material provision, facilities, policies, and atmosphere. It also makes the object of investment clearer: the concept is directed towards learning rather than towards generic participation, and therefore sits more easily within Chinese

expectations of the student role. As the CCSS project developed, this expression was gradually shortened in practice to “xue xi tou ru (学习投入)” (Shi et al., 2024).

It is important to note that when student engagement entered China, discussion of its original conceptual complexity was limited, and the translated term was also not uniform in Chinese. This matters because it could produce both conceptual and empirical slippage. If student engagement is translated and understood differently across studies, scholars may appear to be discussing the same concept while in fact foregrounding different assumptions about agency, responsibility, visibility, and educational purposes. Such ambiguity can also affect how students interpret survey items and how findings are subsequently read in the literature. More broadly, when a concept enters a field primarily through imported instruments and evaluative frameworks, translation is not a secondary issue. It becomes part of the process through which the concept is reconstructed in local use. Therefore, student engagement in China was not simply a borrowed term, but a borrowed and already contested concept that had to be reworked through local educational concerns, linguistic choices, and institutional needs.

With the development and promotion of the CCSS project, not only the concept of “xue xi tou ru (learning investment)” itself, but also a wider vocabulary drawn from the NSSE framework, such as academic challenge and student-faculty interaction, gained visibility in Chinese higher education discourse. These ideas moved beyond academic discussion and entered policy language. For example, the Ministry of Education’s 2019 policy document on the construction of first-class undergraduate courses explicitly called for increasing students’ learning investment and introducing a scientifically calibrated form of “increasing burden”, so that students could experience challenges that require them to “stretch” themselves to achieve (Shi, 2016). Although the meanings of “academic challenge” and “learning investment” in policy discourse did not fully align with their academic usage, administrative endorsement nevertheless facilitated the practical diffusion of these concepts. This suggests that in the Chinese context, the translation and introduction of an academic concept into practice are shaped not only by scholarly debate and institutional reform, but also by the mediating role of state and administrative power. As Shi et al. (2024) note, the relationship

among theory, practice, and policy is especially important for understanding how an imported concept becomes influential in Chinese higher education.

At the level of tool development, the Tsinghua team did not simply adopt the NSSE unchanged. Their first step in introducing the instrument was to conduct what they describe as a process of “cultural adaptation”, revising indicators and items in light of Chinese culture, social norms, values, and specific educational conditions, and thereby producing a Sinicised NSSE-China questionnaire (Luo et al., 2009; Ross et al., 2008). In 2009, the team conducted its first national survey and, for the first time, carried out a systematic comparison of Chinese and American university students’ levels of learning investment (Shi et al., 2011). Yet, in analysing the NSSE-China data, the team concluded that NSSE’s five comparable benchmarks, while broad enough for institution-level comparison, could not fully satisfy the demands of more fine-grained academic analysis or the practical expectations of participating institutions for diagnosis and intervention. In response, they examined the internal structure of the five comparable benchmarks and developed seven “educational process diagnostic indicators”: course cognitive goals, level of course requirements, effective teaching practices, extended out-of-class learning behaviour, orientation towards or away from learning, self-reported educational gains, and university satisfaction (Tu et al., 2013). Although this diagnostic framework did not break entirely with the Western “best practice” logic that underpinned NSSE, it moved beyond the fixed structure of the imported tool and represented a form of locally generated innovation based on Chinese educational practice (Shi et al., 2024).

Subsequently, the team developed a further set of “learning diagnostic indicators”, including higher-order cognitive behaviour, learning strategies, and diverse learning, together with nine secondary dimensions. This resulted in a three-part parallel indicator system consisting of comprehensive analysis indicators (that is, the original five comparable benchmarks), educational process diagnostic indicators, and learning diagnostic indicators, corresponding respectively to school-level, departmental-level, and student-level analytical needs. In 2011, the project was renamed from NSSE-China to CCSS, signalling that it was no longer merely an overseas version of NSSE, but a localised instrument incorporating

Chinese scholarly judgement and Chinese educational concerns. In this sense, the development from NSSE-China to CCSS marked a significant shift from tool adaptation to local reconstruction (Shi et al., 2024; Tu et al., 2013).

This process of reconstruction continued in relation to later developments in the NSSE itself. When the American NSSE project later abandoned the direct use of the original five benchmarks and moved towards broader themes and ten engagement indicators, the Tsinghua team did not simply follow suit. After internal discussion, they concluded that CCSS should not become a psychometric instrument concerned only with reliability and validity or designed solely for academic research. Instead, it should retain what they called the position of an “educational lever”: a tool built around key indicators of student and teaching behaviour that are observable to educators, open to administrative intervention, and useful for promoting educational reform in universities. For this reason, the team emphasised acceptance and applicability in practice rather than highly specialised or obscure technical terminology. This reveals an important feature of the Chinese trajectory of student engagement: the concept and its associated tools were continually assessed not only in terms of measurement quality, but also in terms of their practical value within higher education governance and reform (Shi et al., 2024).

As Chinese higher education entered the stage of mass participation, and as information technology increasingly transformed students’ learning environments, learning methods, and study behaviours, the team developed CCSS 2.0 from 2021 onwards. In doing so, they sought both to foreground the distinctive features of Chinese higher education and to capture more fully the characteristics of Chinese students’ learning investment. The result was a new integrative framework centred on “learning”, and a newly designed CCSS 2.0 instrument built around it. In the team’s account, this “learning-centred” framework has three main dimensions: it highlights students as active subjects with initiative and capacities for independent learning; it emphasises learning as directed activity, including not only classroom knowledge acquisition but also out-of-class activities aimed at self-improvement, helping others, and contributing to society; and it focuses on the school as the professional setting in which such activities

are organised. In this way, “learning” is treated not simply as classroom study, but as an integrated concept bringing together subject, content, and setting. The ideal implied by this framework is one in which teachers and students together form a pedagogical symbiosis within a university environment shaped by institutional support, norms, and culture (Shi et al., 2024).

Viewed in retrospect, the development from NSSE-China to CCSS 1.0 and then to CCSS 2.0 can be described as a movement from an imported tool to localisation, and then towards more autonomous tool-based knowledge innovation. At the same time, CCSS retained comparability with NSSE on core items, thereby preserving the possibility of international comparison and giving Chinese empirical findings a wider point of reference. From this perspective, student engagement entered Chinese higher education not merely as a foreign term, but as part of a broader framework linking learning processes, quality evaluation, survey instruments, and institutional improvement. This helps explain why research on student engagement in China has remained closely tied to empirical measurement and quality-oriented agendas. It also suggests that the Chinese trajectory of student engagement cannot be reduced either to a mechanical transplantation of a Western concept or to immediate local originality. A more accurate understanding is that it has involved selective borrowing, translation, conceptual negotiation, tool adaptation, and gradual contextualisation (Guo et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2024). The next section, therefore, turns to the dominant strands of student engagement research that have developed within Chinese higher education.

2.5.2 Dominant Strands in Chinese Student Engagement Research

After student engagement entered Chinese higher education through NSSE-China and later through the CCSS project, research in this area expanded rapidly. However, the field did not develop evenly across various directions. Its dominant paths were shaped by the way the concept had been introduced: through concerns about educational quality, the need for empirical evidence, and the development of survey-based tools for understanding and assessing undergraduate learning. Shi et al. (2024) note that articles indexed under “higher

education quality” in the Chinese Academic Journal database increased sharply from 21 in 2000 to 175 in 2010, yet much of this literature focused on international quality-assurance experience, policy documents, or conceptual discussion, while comparatively little was grounded in first-hand empirical evidence from Chinese universities. It was in this context that North American models, instruments, and empirical methodologies became especially attractive to Chinese researchers and policymakers. As a result, student engagement research in China developed first and most strongly as a survey-based, quality-oriented, and empirically driven field rather than as a mainly philosophical or critical debate.

The first and most influential strand is therefore survey- and indicator-based research. In this line, student engagement is treated primarily as a measurable construct through which learning quality, educational process, and institutional effectiveness can be examined. The CCSS project has been especially important here. According to a recent retrospective review, by 2024 nearly 230 studies had been produced on the basis of CCSS data, covering themes such as university students’ learning investment and gains, factors influencing learning and development, differences between student groups, differences across institutional types, and educational evaluation in higher education (Guo et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2024). These studies established student engagement as a legitimate empirical object within Chinese higher education research and made it possible to examine patterns of undergraduate learning on a scale previously difficult to achieve. Within this broad survey tradition, some studies have also developed more differentiated accounts of engagement. For example, Zhu and Arnold (2013), using self-report data from 18,607 students across 55 colleges in Beijing, distinguish between academic behavioural engagement, academic emotional engagement, extra-curricular engagement, and social emotional engagement, and examine how these forms relate to gains in knowledge, cognitive skills, social skills, identity development, and moral development. Their study shows that Chinese empirical research has not simply treated engagement as a single undifferentiated variable. It has also attempted to distinguish between different forms of engagement and to examine how they relate differently to student development.

A second major strand links learning environment, educational process, engagement, and outcomes. Rather than studying engagement in isolation, this line of research situates it within broader explanatory models that include teaching quality, classroom assessment, student–teacher or student–faculty interaction, peer interaction, campus environment, learning approaches, and educational gains. In this strand, engagement is not treated simply as an individual disposition or a general level of activity, but as something shaped by specific educational conditions and relationships. Guo et al. (2022) pointed to an emerging evidence-based literature on student–staff interaction, learning attainment and satisfaction, and high-impact practices in Chinese universities. This is important because it shows that Chinese research did not focus only on students’ effort in the abstract, but also began to ask how institutional arrangements and educational relationships influence learning. Later reflections on the CCSS project likewise suggest that insufficient student–teacher or student–faculty interaction was one of the recurring concerns revealed through early diagnosis of undergraduate learning quality in China (Shi et al., 2024).

Later work continued in this direction by exploring more specific aspects of the educational process and course experience. For example, Li and Shi (2014) examined student–staff interaction in relation to students’ learning attainment and educational satisfaction in Chinese universities. Guo and Shi (2016) further analysed the relationships among classroom assessment, students’ learning processes, and outcomes. Yin and Ke (2017), using data from 882 Chinese undergraduates, explored links between course experience and student engagement and found that some aspects of course organisation and workload were positively associated with engagement. Related work on classroom expression also shows that students’ active participation is shaped by multiple conditions, including cognitive readiness for learning, intrinsic learning motivation, extra-curricular interpersonal interaction, and teachers’ inquiry-based pedagogies (Zhang & Shi, 2020). Taken together, these studies show that Chinese scholars have paid substantial attention to the conditions shaping engagement. They ask not only whether students are engaged, but also how teaching practices, assessment structures, staff and peer interaction, and

educational environments influence learning behaviour and development. In this sense, this strand is directly relevant to questions about enablers and barriers. At the same time, these conditions are usually treated as explanatory variables within statistical or causal models. They are less often analysed as interrelated arrangements that students encounter, interpret, and negotiate in the day-to-day organisation of university life.

A third strand introduces a more psychological perspective on student engagement. Scholars argue that the behavioural focus of NSSE-, AUSSE-, and CCSS-type traditions is too narrow to capture the full complexity of student engagement. For instance, Yin and Wang (2016) explicitly position their work against the dominance of behavioural perspectives and instead use Martin's Motivation and Engagement Wheel to examine Chinese undergraduates' adaptive and maladaptive motivation and engagement. Their survey of 1,311 students from 10 universities in Beijing shows that Chinese undergraduates may score relatively high on both adaptive and maladaptive dimensions at the same time, suggesting that student engagement in China cannot be adequately understood through observable participation alone. Their study also identifies patterned differences by gender, grade level, discipline, and institution type. Yin (2018) develops this line further by analysing the relationships among motivation, engagement, and the mastery of generic skills using data from 2,013 undergraduates across 11 universities. This study argues for moving beyond the dominant behavioural approach and incorporating students' psychological investment, encompassing both the more positive and the more problematic sides of engagement. This psychological strand is valuable because it shows that Chinese research has also begun to ask why students engage and what supports or constrains their engagement. Yet it still tends to treat engagement through measurable individual dimensions and patterned differences, rather than through students' day-to-day accounts of how engagement unfolds across campus life.

Alongside these broader strands, a more scattered body of studies has examined student engagement in specific settings, modes, and disciplinary contexts. These studies are useful because they move closer to concrete learning situations, although they often define and measure engagement in quite different ways.

Research on online learning has taken this in one direction. For example, She et al. (2023) evaluated the psychometric properties of the University Student Engagement Inventory among Chinese university students in online learning conditions, indicating that Chinese engagement research has begun to consider how engagement may be organised differently when learning extends beyond the physical classroom. Other narrower studies in language learning, collaborative learning, and course-specific pedagogic contexts likewise operationalise engagement through task-specific, course-specific, or pedagogy-specific lenses. Although such work brings engagement closer to actual educational situations, it remains difficult to synthesise because the units of analysis, definitions, and measurement strategies differ considerably.

A more clearly recognisable recent development is the rise of phenomenon-based local inquiry. The CCSS retrospective presents this as one of the project's major contributions: through large-scale empirical work, researchers began to identify educational phenomena that were difficult to notice through everyday intuition alone and not easily explained by imported frameworks (Shi et al., 2024). Some resembled patterns already identified elsewhere, such as the “sophomore slump”, which in the Chinese literature is often discussed as a “second-year low tide” or “second-year low point” (Guo et al., 2022). These findings suggest that Chinese student engagement is not stable across the undergraduate trajectory and that year-level differences may reflect developmental and institutional processes rather than fixed personal traits. An even more important example is the so-called “senior-year phenomenon”. Drawing on a 2013 Tsinghua learning report, Wen et al. (2014) note that by the fourth year, some conventional indicators no longer remained strong, and phenomena such as empty classrooms or class absence became more visible.

At first sight, this might be read simply as a decline in engagement. However, a closer analysis suggested a more complex picture. External motivations such as obtaining high grades or meeting teachers' and parents' expectations became weaker, while internal motivations, reflective learning, integrative learning, and more purposeful forms of student–faculty interaction became stronger. At the same time, although students' formal course load was reduced, their out-of-class

learning time did not necessarily decline, and non-course high-impact activities became a major form of intensive engagement in the final year. On this basis, Wen et al. (2014) argued that the fourth year should not be understood as a straightforward extension of the previous three years, but rather as an important transitional stage in which students move from being primarily school learners to becoming workers, researchers, or social adults.

Building on this report, Shi et al. (2024) further suggest that what appears to be weaker engagement on some conventional indicators may in fact reflect a transition away from the inertia of a “post-high-school” mode of learning and towards a different mode of engagement. They also argue that further research, especially through closer comparison with Western students’ learning practices and more sustained dialogue with theories of learning and student development, could help develop locally grounded concepts further and better explain the factors underlying the “senior-year phenomenon”. In particular, such work may help explain why many Chinese undergraduates do not fully complete this transition in learning mode until they are about to leave university (Shi et al., 2024). This interpretation also resonates with wider Chinese discussions of the weak articulation between secondary and higher education, and with recent concerns about the “high-schoolisation” of university learning, in which students’ time use and study patterns continue to bear the imprint of highly structured, examination-oriented prior schooling (Bao & Li, 2016; Ding & Li, 2022). This is useful because it shows both the progress and the current limits of local concept-building in Chinese student engagement research.

Another prominent example of this phenomenon-based development is classroom silence. In Chinese higher education research, classroom silence has become an important topic in discussions of student learning and engagement (Frambach et al., 2014; Li & Tao, 2022). Its importance lies not only in its visibility in everyday teaching, but also in the way it has pushed Chinese research beyond broad score comparison and general variable modelling towards identifying locally meaningful educational phenomena. Because classroom silence is also closely tied to wider interpretations of Chinese students and their supposed

negative engagement, a fuller discussion of how it has been understood and why those understandings are limited is deferred to the next section.

Taken together, these strands show that Chinese student engagement research has already developed considerable empirical breadth. It has examined different forms of engagement, including classroom learning, out-of-class learning, extra-curricular participation, emotional engagement, and online engagement under bounded learning conditions. It has also examined a range of shaping conditions, including classroom assessment, staff interaction, teaching methods, institutional type, discipline, student motivation, and different learning modes. In this sense, the literature is already relevant to the present study's interest in what forms engagement takes and what conditions shape it. However, this body of work remains uneven. It is strongest where engagement can be measured, modelled, compared, or diagnosed. It is also often organised around one explanatory framework, one setting, one mode, or one phenomenon at a time. As a result, existing Chinese research is less likely to hold together, within one design, who students engage with, where engagement is organised, what forms it takes, and how these dimensions intersect across the interconnected settings of campus life. This limitation is important because it helps explain why further research is still needed and also prepares the ground for the following discussion of common interpretations of Chinese students and what remains underexplored.

2.5.3 Common Interpretations of Chinese Students and Their Limits

A recurring feature of the literature on student engagement in Chinese higher education is that it is often entangled with broader interpretations of “the Chinese learner”. These interpretations did not emerge only within research on Chinese higher education itself. Rather, they form part of a longer international discussion that gained sustained attention from the 1980s onwards, as Chinese students became increasingly visible in global educational exchange and comparative education research (Zhang, 2023). Watkins and Biggs (2001), for example, characterised Chinese learners as students shaped by educational settings rooted in Confucian cultural traditions and argued that their learning was deeply influenced by wider Chinese belief systems, especially Confucian values. Within

this broader discussion, many international studies focused on aspects of Chinese students' learning that appeared especially striking, particularly in comparison with students in other contexts, such as memorisation, repetition, studying for parents, and classroom silence. When read through dominant Western educational assumptions, these practices were often interpreted as signs of passivity, silence, dependence on authority, and a preference for repetition rather than for critical or dialogic learning.

At the same time, this international literature did not remain uniformly deficit-oriented. As Chinese students continued to perform strongly in overseas classrooms and international assessments, earlier negative interpretations came under pressure, giving rise to what later became widely discussed as the "Chinese learner paradox" (Biggs & Watkins, 1996). This prompted a number of scholars to re-examine the assumptions behind earlier claims and to explore the distinctive features of Chinese students' learning in more empirical terms. Marton et al. (1996), for example, offered an influential analysis of repetition and memorisation, arguing that memory in Chinese students' learning could involve both mechanical memorisation and meaningful memorisation, and that memorisation could itself be a route to understanding. Similarly, Kember (2016) argued that Chinese students' learning often integrates memory and understanding rather than placing them in simple opposition. Later scholarship also moved beyond isolated empirical findings towards broader theoretical accounts. Jin and Cortazzi (2006), for example, attempted to construct a Confucian model of student learning, drawing in part on earlier work on Chinese cultural traditions in overseas educational research.

However, these revisions did not fully resolve the problem. Even where earlier deficit-oriented interpretations were challenged, Chinese students were still often treated as a broad cultural type. This tendency to tie "the Chinese learner" too closely to Confucian culture has itself been questioned. Grimshaw (2007) and Wang (2013), for example, argue that the category of "the Chinese learner" is not simply descriptive, but discursive: it constructs Chinese and Western students as contrasting types and risks exaggerating difference, reproducing binary thinking, and generating new labels in place of older ones. Chinese scholars have raised

related concerns. While acknowledging the value of earlier international work, they argue that broad formulations such as “Chinese-style learning” or the “Confucian learning model” often remain too general, attending to possible cultural characteristics without adequately explaining Chinese students’ actual learning practices or the specific mechanisms that support them. As a result, there has been growing interest in understanding Chinese students’ learning in relation to local educational arrangements and social conditions, rather than through broad imported categories alone (e.g., Lu, 1993; Shi, 2018; Ye, 2001).

Within student engagement research, one of the main ways these broader interpretations reappear is through judgements about classroom participation and silence. In participation-centred accounts of student engagement, speaking, questioning, discussing, and publicly displaying one’s learning are often treated as the clearest signs of engagement. From this perspective, students who speak little can easily be read as hesitant, passive, insufficiently critical, or inadequately active. Yet such readings are already shaped by assumptions about what counts as legitimate participation, and they risk narrowing student engagement to those forms of activity that are most visible and verbally expressive. Gourlay’s (2015) critique of the “tyranny of participation” is particularly useful here. She argues that dominant engagement discourse privileges practices that are communicative, public, observable, and recordable, while quieter, private, non-verbal, and less visible forms of study are more easily treated as deviant or deficient. She also notes that such assumptions can contribute to the pathologisation of supposedly “passive” East Asian classroom behaviour. This bias towards visible participation may be reinforced further by performative understandings of engagement, in which valued engagement increasingly becomes what can be publicly demonstrated, recognised, and institutionally validated (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017).

Classroom silence provides one of the clearest sites where these issues can be observed. It has been widely discussed in both Chinese and international research on student learning (e.g., Frambach et al., 2014; Li & Tao, 2022), precisely because it appears to challenge assumptions associated with student-centred and active learning. Within many mainstream educational frameworks,

silence is often treated as a sign of mechanical or passive learning, associated with limited critical thinking, insufficient deep learning, and weaker educational outcomes. Yet Chinese students often remain relatively silent in class while still achieving strong academic results. This apparent contradiction has encouraged some scholars to question whether silence should be interpreted in purely deficit terms. Inagaki et al. (1998) and Cortazzi and Jin (2001), for example, suggest that Chinese students' silence does not necessarily indicate an absence of deep learning, describing it instead as forms of "listen-oriented learning" or "silent participation".

Large-scale Chinese research has developed this challenge further. Using data from the China College Student Survey, Zhang and Shi (2020) found, on the one hand, that classroom silence is indeed a real and widespread phenomenon among Chinese undergraduates. On the other hand, related analyses also show that silence does not mean an absence of thinking. Even among students who rarely spoke in class, 91.37% still reported an overall level of cognitive engagement that was at least average or relatively high (Zhang et al., 2020). This is important because it directly challenges the assumption that visible verbal participation can serve as a self-evident proxy for meaningful engagement. Instead, it suggests that the relationship between expression, cognition, and engagement is more complex than participation-centred frameworks often allow.

More detailed local research develops this challenge to deficit interpretations. Lv (2018) argues that classroom silence should be treated as a distinctive "educational fact" in Chinese classrooms rather than simply as a failure of participation. His work shows that students can be differentiated not only according to whether they speak, but also according to whether they are actively thinking. The category of the "silent but actively thinking student" is especially important, because it shows clearly that silence and serious thought are not mutually exclusive. Lv (2020) further argues that silence develops adaptively within educational trajectories and is entangled with cultural values related to listening, self-restraint, and not disturbing others. He identifies a distinctive phenomenon of "altruistic silence", which reflects concerns about restraining one's questioning and controlling one's expression. In a related but differently

framed argument, Chen (2023) interprets silence not as a personality defect or merely a teaching failure, but as a socially meaningful classroom phenomenon shaped by school structures, role expectations, and the social costs of speaking. From this perspective, classroom participation should be understood as the unity of silence and speech, rather than reduced to speech alone. Silence may serve reflective, strategic, or protective functions, while willingness to speak is shaped by emotional risk, peer evaluation, classroom power relations, and judgements about what counts as appropriate student behaviour.

Research on the causes of classroom silence points in a similar direction. Based on interviews with 21 students from different types of Chinese universities, Zhang (2022) found that many factors shape students' active classroom expression. Some of these, such as preparation before class, teaching quality, and personality, are also discussed in Western research. However, Zhang argues that Chinese students' expression is additionally shaped by relationship-oriented concerns that are more closely connected to local social norms, especially face. Students may worry about speaking badly and losing face, appearing too high-profile and therefore socially out of place, wasting other students' time, interrupting the teacher's line of thought, or undermining teacher authority. These considerations are not easily captured within mainstream frameworks of deep learning or engagement. Instead, concepts from Chinese relational sociology, especially work on face, offer a more contextually grounded explanation (Zhai, 2013, 2021). In this sense, classroom silence cannot be reduced to insufficient participation. It is also shaped by interactional norms concerning authority, relational sensitivity, and acceptable self-presentation. This point is reinforced by local empirical work showing that active classroom expression is positively shaped by students' cognitive preparation, intrinsic learning motivation, extra-curricular interpersonal interaction, and teachers' inquiry-based teaching practices (Zhang & Shi, 2020). Such findings suggest that expression and silence are not simply stable cultural dispositions, but are organised through specific pedagogic and relational conditions.

Nor are these limitations confined to classroom silence. Research on Chinese undergraduates' motivation and engagement also suggests that students who

appear anxious, pressured, or shaped by fear of failure are not necessarily disengaged. Rather than leading straightforwardly to withdrawal, these orientations may coexist with sustained effort and active study (Yin & Wang, 2016; Yin, 2018). This again cautions against reading apparently negative dispositions too quickly as evidence of non-engagement. More broadly, Chinese scholarship has increasingly emphasised that students' learning and engagement are shaped not only by individual dispositions or broad cultural assumptions, but also by family background, pre-university experiences, institutional characteristics, wider social conditions, and the pressures of particular historical moments (e.g., Du, 2015; Guo et al., 2012; Hong & Guo, 2019; Huang & Li, 2020; Li & Wang, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2012, 2014). This matters for the present study because it shifts attention away from fixed interpretations of "the Chinese student" and towards the wider conditions through which engagement is shaped, organised, and made meaningful. These conditions are treated here as important background influences rather than as fully analysed explanatory variables. Their implications for student engagement will be examined more fully later in the thesis through both existing scholarship and the empirical material. Taken together, the studies reviewed above suggest that student engagement in Chinese higher education cannot be adequately understood through broad cultural stereotypes or through participation-centred assumptions that equate visible speech with meaningful engagement. A fuller account requires attention to the specific social, pedagogic, and institutional conditions under which different forms of engagement become possible, difficult, valued, or consequential.

2.5.4 What Remains Underexplored in Chinese Engagement Research

Although Chinese research on student engagement has developed considerable empirical breadth, important areas remain underexplored. As the previous section has shown, the literature is strongest where engagement can be measured, modelled, compared, or diagnosed (Guo et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2024). Survey- and indicator-based research has generated substantial knowledge about learning investment, educational process, student gains, and differences across student groups and institutional types (Shi et al., 2024; Zhu & Arnold,

2013). More localised studies have also examined particular phenomena, such as classroom silence, online learning, classroom expression, and student–staff interaction (Li & Shi, 2014; She et al., 2023; Zhang & Shi, 2020). However, this body of work remains uneven in its coverage of engagement as it is lived and organised across the interconnected settings of day-to-day university life.

One important limitation is that Chinese engagement research is still more likely to examine one setting, one explanatory framework, one mode, or one phenomenon at a time than to hold these dimensions together within a broader account of day-to-day campus practice. Existing studies have generated valuable findings on classroom learning, out-of-class learning, emotional engagement, online learning, and particular local educational phenomena (She et al., 2023; Wen et al., 2014; Yin & Wang, 2016; Yin, 2018; Zhang & Shi, 2020). Yet they are less likely to examine, within one design, who students engage with across different parts of university life, where engagement is organised across campus and digital settings, what forms it takes in day-to-day practice, and how these dimensions intersect. In this sense, the field remains stronger at describing measurable patterns than at providing fine-grained accounts of engagement as a lived and relational practice.

A second limitation concerns the treatment of the conditions shaping engagement. Chinese research has already shown that engagement is influenced by a wide range of factors, including student–staff interaction, classroom assessment, teaching methods, institutional type, motivation, and different learning modes (Guo & Shi, 2016; Li & Shi, 2014; Yin & Ke, 2017; Zhang & Shi, 2020). However, these conditions are usually treated as explanatory variables within statistical or causal models rather than as interrelated arrangements that students encounter, interpret, and negotiate in practice. Relatedly, although Chinese studies have examined relationships among learning process, educational environment, assessment, and student outcomes, they have been less likely to engage explicitly with normative questions about assessment itself: what assessment is for, whose purposes it serves, and how evaluative arrangements define what counts as worthwhile participation. As a result, assessment often appears in the literature as an explanatory variable or a

technical educational process, rather than as part of a wider evaluative logic through which some forms of engagement become more visible, valued, and consequential than others.

A third underexplored area concerns the material and digital organisation of engagement. Although Chinese higher education research has increasingly addressed online learning and digital platforms, much of this work remains focused on bounded online settings, psychometric validation, quantitative comparison, or mode-specific outcomes (She et al., 2023; Yin & Wang, 2016). Recent work by Cheng (2024), for example, explicitly argues that in the Chinese context the majority of empirical studies still emphasise quantitative measurement, while few explore in depth the factors that shape student engagement, particularly from a sociomaterial perspective. Her ongoing project is significant because it turns to students' day-to-day digital practices in different types of Chinese universities through a digital ethnographic approach, thereby pointing to a direction that remains relatively rare in the field. It also highlights how digital inequalities may be reproduced in day-to-day higher education practice rather than being reducible to simple questions of access. This suggests that engagement across material and digital spaces, and the inequalities that shape students' relations with technology, remain insufficiently explored in existing Chinese engagement research.

A fourth underexplored area concerns visibility, spatial organisation, and governance in educational settings. Existing Chinese engagement research has paid considerable attention to classroom participation, silence, and teaching methods, but less to how spaces and surveillance arrangements may shape what becomes visible, recordable, and consequential as engagement (Frambach et al., 2014; Lv, 2018, 2020; Zhang, 2022). This matters because, as Macfarlane (2013) argues in a broader critique of university attendance policies, higher education institutions increasingly monitor whether students conform to behavioural expectations associated with learning. In this context, attendance should not be mistaken for engagement, and the surveillance of learning extends beyond simple presence to wider expectations of participation and conformity. Macfarlane further suggests that such practices are tied to broader logics of

learnerism, presenteeism, and the narrowing of student academic freedom. Recent work by Zhao et al. (2026) is useful here. Although not framed directly as student engagement research, their study of surveillance technologies in Chinese university classrooms argues that these dynamics remain underexplored in Chinese higher education and shows how educational spaces can be organised through managerial and disciplinary logics. Their findings are especially suggestive for the present study because they indicate that even architecturally “democratised” seminar-style classrooms may contain more intensive surveillance systems, fostering self-surveillance and anticipatory self-censorship. This line of work points to the importance of treating classroom and campus environments not simply as neutral backdrops, but as spaces through which conduct, participation, and visibility are organised.

Taken together, these limitations suggest that Chinese student engagement research remains comparatively weaker in several areas: in examining engagement as an everyday campus practice across interconnected settings; in analysing shaping conditions as lived and relational arrangements rather than discrete variables; in addressing hybrid material and digital practices through qualitative and sociomaterial approaches; and in exploring how visibility, space, and governance shape what counts as engagement in practice. These gaps matter because they leave underexplored the ordinary but consequential ways in which engagement is organised, experienced, and differentiated in university life. The present study responds to these gaps by offering a fine-grained, campus-based qualitative account of Chinese undergraduates’ engagement, focusing on who they engage with, where engagement is organised, what forms it takes, and how it is shaped through the relational conditions of day-to-day university life.

2.6 Synthesis, Research Gaps, and Implications for the Present Study

2.6.1 Synthesis of the Literature

This review has shown that student engagement is an influential but conceptually unsettled field. Historically, the concept developed through a genealogy of related constructs concerned with students’ time, effort, involvement, interaction,

integration, and educational outcomes, and was later consolidated through the rise of survey-based traditions such as NSSE (Kuh, 2009). These developments made engagement highly visible within higher education discourse and closely associated it with educational quality, student success, and institutional improvement. At the same time, the review has shown that this growing influence did not produce conceptual stability. Instead, student engagement continues to be used across different analytical levels, for different purposes, and with different assumptions about what it is, how it should be recognised, and what it is for (Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2010; Zepke, 2021).

The review has also shown that the mainstream is neither single nor conceptually coherent. Rather than referring to one fixed model, the mainstream is better understood as a group of influential understandings that have become especially visible in research, policy, and institutional practice. Across these accounts, engagement is closely linked to participation, support, student success, and institutional improvement, and is often treated as something that can be identified, fostered, and, in many cases, measured or assessed (Coates, 2006, 2007; Kahu, 2013; Zepke, 2015, 2018). These mainstream understandings have contributed important insights. They have helped make teaching and learning more discussable, linked student activity to educational conditions and outcomes, and provided institutions with practical ways of reflecting on and improving the student experience (Kuh, 2009; Thomas, 2012; Zepke, 2018). However, the review has also shown that these influential approaches remain incomplete. They tend to privilege what is practical, visible, measurable, and institutionally recognisable, and they may leave underexplored the object of engagement, quieter and less visible forms of study, and deeper questions of educational purpose, value, and recognition (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Gourlay, 2015, 2017; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; McArthur, 2023).

A further conclusion is that empirical patterns in the field also shape what becomes visible as engagement. Existing research is extensive, but not evenly distributed. Macro-level survey traditions are strong on institutional comparison, benchmarking, and associations with student outcomes; meso-level studies are strong on programmes, belonging, support, and institutional environment; and

micro-level studies provide richer local detail, but often within bounded courses, programmes, platforms, or short temporal windows (Carini et al., 2006; Crawford et al., 2024; Gasiewski et al., 2012; Korhonen et al., 2024; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The review therefore suggests that the field is not marked by a simple absence of evidence, but by a patterned selectivity. Existing empirical work is especially effective at making visible measurable participation, reported support, platform activity, and selected outcomes. It is less effective at capturing engagement as a fluid, situated, and relational practice unfolding across multiple connected settings in day-to-day university life (Gourlay, 2015; Gourlay & Oliver, 2016; Tight, 2020).

The review has also shown that student engagement in Chinese higher education has largely developed as a borrowed but actively reconstructed concept. Introduced first through the translation and adaptation of NSSE and later expanded through the CCSS project, engagement in China has been closely tied to concerns with educational quality, learning processes, diagnosis, and institutional improvement (Shi et al., 2024). Chinese scholarship has generated substantial empirical work on learning investment, educational environment, classroom participation, student gains, online learning, and local educational phenomena such as classroom silence (Guo et al., 2022; She et al., 2023; Zhang & Shi, 2020). At the same time, the review has shown that this literature remains strongest where engagement can be measured, modelled, compared, or diagnosed. It is comparatively less developed in relation to students' day-to-day accounts of engagement across interconnected campus settings, the sociomaterial and spatial organisation of engagement, and the relational and evaluative conditions through which engagement becomes visible, valued, and consequential in practice. In this sense, both the wider international literature and the Chinese literature point towards the same broad conclusion: student engagement is a powerful but incomplete concept whose dominant uses illuminate some dimensions of university life more readily than others.

2.6.2 Research Gaps and Implications for the Present Study

Taken together, the literature reviewed in this chapter points to several research gaps that shape the focus of the present study. First, although student engagement has been widely discussed and measured, there remains a need for research that does not begin from a fixed model of what engagement should look like. Existing mainstream frameworks have been useful in linking participation, support, and educational outcomes, but they also tend to stabilise engagement around visible, measurable, and institutionally recognisable forms of activity (Gourlay, 2015; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; Zepke, 2015). This leaves space for research that approaches engagement more openly as something to be interpreted through students' own descriptions of what they do, who and what they engage with, and how they make sense of these practices in context.

Second, the review has identified a gap in relation to the object, form, and site of engagement. Much of the literature still leaves insufficiently specified what students are engaging with, even though the meaning of engagement changes depending on its object (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). Likewise, existing studies often privilege bounded pedagogic settings, survey indicators, or visible participation, while offering less fine-grained attention to where engagement is organised across campus life and what forms it takes in day-to-day practice. This is important for the present study because its first research question asks not simply whether students are engaged, but how they describe their engagement in relation to who they engage with, where that engagement is organised, and what forms it takes. Addressing this gap requires an approach that can remain close to lived accounts while being sensitive to the diversity, hybridity, and everyday character of campus practice.

Third, the review has shown that shaping conditions are often treated in existing research as variables, predictors, barriers, or supports rather than as relational arrangements that students encounter and negotiate in practice. This is true both in the wider international literature and in much Chinese research, where engagement is frequently examined through causal or correlational models linking teaching, assessment, motivation, support, and outcomes (Guo & Shi, 2016; Yin & Ke, 2017; Zepke, 2018). Yet such work leaves relatively less room

for understanding how evaluative systems, institutional routines, spatial organisation, digital infrastructures, and wider expectations become consequential in students' day-to-day lives. This is especially important for the present study because its second research question retains the familiar language of enablers and barriers, while treating these not as fixed variables with stable effects, but as relational and context-dependent conditions that may open some forms of engagement while constraining others.

Fourth, the review highlights the need for research that can better account for the hybrid organisation of engagement in contemporary university life. Existing work on online learning, digital platforms, and learning analytics has made important contributions, but often within bounded online settings or through trace-based and behaviourally visible forms of activity (Bergdahl et al., 2024; Cheng, 2024; Gourlay & Oliver, 2016). What remains less explored is how engagement is enacted across connected physical and digital spaces in day-to-day campus life, and how such practices are shaped by relations among people, artefacts, infrastructures, and institutional arrangements. This gap is especially relevant in the Chinese context, where contemporary undergraduate life is increasingly mediated through digital platforms, communication technologies, and wider smart-campus infrastructures, while still being strongly organised around campus-based routines and settings.

Fifth, the review has shown that Chinese student engagement research, despite its considerable empirical breadth, remains comparatively less likely to hold together within one design the four questions that are central to this thesis: who students engage with, where engagement is organised, what forms it takes, and how it is shaped across day-to-day university life. Existing Chinese studies have generated important findings on learning investment, classroom participation, emotional and behavioural engagement, online learning, and educational process, but they are often organised around one mode, one phenomenon, one variable set, or one bounded educational setting at a time (Shi et al., 2024; Zhu & Arnold, 2013). There remains, therefore, a need for fine-grained, campus-based qualitative research grounded in undergraduates' own accounts of day-to-day engagement.

These gaps have direct implications for the present study. They justify a qualitative, campus-based inquiry that does not treat engagement as a settled benchmark, but as a lived and interpretive object. They also support the decision to focus on Chinese undergraduates in one public university, so that engagement can be explored within a relatively coherent institutional, spatial, relational, and digital environment while still allowing for variation across students. More specifically, the gaps identified in this review point towards the value of examining engagement as day-to-day campus practice and of analysing shaping conditions as relational and consequential rather than as discrete predictors. For this reason, the next chapter develops two complementary theoretical lenses: a sociomaterial lens to interpret engagement as emergent and practically organised across people, spaces, artefacts, and routines, and a Foucauldian lens to analyse how engagement is recognised, valued, and shaped through institutional and evaluative arrangements.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Lenses for Interpreting Student Engagement

3.1 Overview

This chapter develops the two theoretical lenses used in this thesis. It explains why a dual-lens approach is adopted and clarifies how each lens supports the analysis of the research questions. The chapter argues that a single theoretical lens would be insufficient to capture both the practical organisation of students' day-to-day engagement on campus and the wider institutional and evaluative conditions through which engagement is shaped, recognised, and made consequential. To address this, the thesis adopts two complementary lenses: a sociomaterial lens and a Foucauldian lens on power, discipline, and governmentality.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 3.2 introduces the rationale for the dual-lens approach and clarifies the analytic role of each lens in relation to the research questions and the Chinese university context. Section 3.3 develops a sociomaterial lens for analysing engagement as an emergent and practically organised phenomenon in everyday campus life, with relevance to RQ1. Section 3.4 develops a Foucauldian lens to examine how institutional and evaluative arrangements shape engagement, with particular relevance to RQ2, and situates this analysis within the hybrid governance context of Chinese higher education. Section 3.5 summarises the chapter and concludes by showing how the two lenses work together as complementary analytic resources for the empirical analysis.

3.2 The Dual Theoretical Lenses: Rationale and Analytic Roles

This section explains why the thesis adopts two theoretical lenses and clarifies the analytic role of each lens. The choice of a dual-lens approach is not only a technical response to the two research questions. It also reflects the empirical and contextual complexity of the study. The thesis aims to develop a fine-grained account of Chinese undergraduates' day-to-day engagement on campus. This

requires analytic resources that can attend to both how engagement is organised and described in everyday practice and how it is shaped within wider institutional conditions, including evaluative arrangements through which participation is recognised, recorded, and rewarded. A single lens would risk overemphasising one side of this picture. The two lenses are therefore adopted to address the different analytic demands of the study while remaining sensitive to the Chinese university context, where everyday practices and governance conditions are closely intertwined.

To clarify the terminology used in this chapter, “conditions” is used as a broad term for the institutional and policy context that shapes engagement (for example, university rules, assessment regimes, and wider governance expectations), while “arrangement” refers to the more concrete organisational and evaluative configuration through which such conditions are enacted in university life (for example, timetables, course requirements, platform procedures, and recording practices).

The first lens is sociomaterial. This lens is used because RQ1 asks how students describe their engagement in everyday campus life, including who they engage with, where engagement occurs, and what forms engagement takes. These questions require more than an account of individual motivation or observable participation. They also require a perspective that moves beyond dominant human-centred accounts of engagement and attends to how engagement is organised in practice through relations among people, artefacts, spaces, temporal routines, and organisational arrangements. In this study, the sociomaterial lens provides that analytic orientation. It allows engagement to be examined as emergent, relational, and practically organised, while also recognising that forms and objects of engagement may be fluid and shifting across situations, times, and relations (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Bryson, 2014; Coates, 2007; Gourlay, 2017). In this sense, the lens is particularly suited to the descriptive and interpretive aims of RQ1.

At the same time, the study does not use the sociomaterial lens to explain all dimensions of engagement. While it is useful for analysing how engagement is

enacted in practice, it is less suited on its own to examining why some forms of engagement become more visible, valued, rewarded, or more consequential for students' recognition, opportunities, and outcomes than others. RQ2 raises this further issue by focusing on the conditions shaping engagement. Although framed in the familiar language of "enabler" and "barrier", the study does not treat these as fixed variables with stable positive or negative effects. Instead, it examines shaping conditions as relational and context-dependent. This requires a second lens that can analyse norms, evaluation, institutional arrangements, and governance rationalities.

For this reason, the second lens draws on Foucauldian concepts of power, discipline, and governmentality. This lens is used primarily to support RQ2. It provides a way of analysing how engagement is recognised, valued, and shaped through institutional and evaluative arrangements, rather than treating engagement as a purely individual matter or explaining conditions as external factors acting in a simple causal way (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1977, 1980, 1991). In this perspective, the analytic focus is not only on what students do, but also on how norms, classifications, assessment practices, and organisational expectations shape what can count as legitimate or worthwhile engagement. This lens is therefore useful for moving beyond a binary reading of enablers and barriers and for examining how the same condition may organise possibilities for engagement in different ways across situations.

The two lenses are used in a complementary way rather than as two competing explanations. The sociomaterial lens is used to analyse engagement as lived and enacted practice in everyday campus life. The Foucauldian lens is used to analyse the conditions through which such practices are shaped, recognised, and made consequential. Put differently, the first lens helps the study examine how engagement happens, while the second lens helps the study examine how engagement is conditioned and governed. This distinction is analytic rather than absolute. The study does not assume that practice and condition can be separated neatly in lived experience. Instead, the dual-lens approach allows the analysis to move between these dimensions without collapsing one into the other. Although each lens is particularly useful for one research question, they are not

applied in a rigid one-to-one way. Rather, they remain in dialogue throughout the analysis.

A further reason for this combination is the Chinese university context of the study. The thesis does not assume that student engagement in China can be adequately analysed through a single human-centred model of participation, nor through a single explanatory template driven from Western critiques of higher education alone. The study requires a framework that can attend to the practical organisation of engagement in everyday campus life while also examining the institutional and governance conditions within which engagement is recognised and shaped. The dual-lens approach is therefore used not simply to divide labour between RQ1 and RQ2, but to support a more context-sensitive account of student engagement in a Chinese university setting.

Finally, it is important to clarify how theory is used in this study. The thesis adopts a phenomenological approach and uses semi-structured interviews. The sociomaterial and Foucauldian lenses are therefore used as sensitising concepts to guide the interpretation of participants' accounts, rather than as a fixed theoretical system applied in full (Blumer, 1954). This means the analysis remains grounded in students' descriptions of their day-to-day engagement while drawing on conceptual resources to interpret both the organisation of practice and the conditions shaping it. The following sections develop these two lenses in turn.

3.3 A Sociomaterial Lens: Engagement as Emergent Assemblages

3.3.1 Reframing Student Engagement: Beyond Human-Centred and Visibility-Biased Accounts

As reviewed in Chapter 2, student engagement research draws on diverse theoretical traditions and spans multiple levels of higher education, from policy agendas and institutional strategies to students' lived experience (Kahu et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2017; Zepke, 2024). This breadth has generated valuable insights, but it also means that "student engagement" is often used as an

umbrella term that gathers different assumptions about what engagement is and where it is located. In many influential accounts, engagement is closely tied to participation in “educationally purposeful” activities and is treated as something that can be strengthened through student effort and institutional design (Kahu, 2013; Kuh, 2009). This framing is practical for institutions because it supports intervention and measurement, yet it can also shape what becomes recognisable as engagement (Gourlay, 2017; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017).

A key limitation in mainstream framings is a persistent bias towards a human-centred and visibility-oriented understanding of engagement. As Gourlay (2015) argues, mainstream conceptions of student engagement place strong emphasis on individual motivation, determination, agency and observable participation. Although the significance of social and communal factors is recognised, student engagement is still often understood within a strongly humanistic view of education (Gourlay & Oliver, 2016). This positions the “putative agentive and free-floating human at the centre”, while the physical objects, resources, and devices are treated as “tools”, and spatial and temporal dimensions are regarded as “context or backcloth to human action and endeavour” (Gourlay, 2015, p. 407). This does not mean that mainstream work ignores students’ agency; rather, agency is often assumed in a narrow sense as an individual capacity to choose, invest effort, and display participation. What receives less attention is how the ability to act (and what counts as appropriate action) is shaped through the organisation of study across space, time, and material arrangements (Gourlay, 2017). This matters because quieter and less public practices – reading, writing, searching, note-taking, and thinking – may be central to engagement with knowledge, but they are harder to capture within participation-centred framings that privilege visible contribution and traceable outputs (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Gourlay, 2015).

A related conceptual issue concerns what engagement is directed towards. Ashwin and McVitty (2015) note how often the “object” of student engagement is left undefined, even though engagement takes different meanings depending on what students are engaging with. To address this, they propose considering what is being “formed” through student engagement. They distinguish three broad

objects of engagement (engagement to form individual understanding, curricula, and communities) and three broad degrees of engagement (consultation, partnership, and leadership). They also argue that without engaging with disciplinary and professional knowledge, students cannot engage with the development of higher education curricula and communities (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). Their model, and related work (Bryson, 2014; Coates, 2007; Klemenčič, 2015), is also useful because it treats engagement as fluid and dynamic rather than fixed: it evolves over time, has various degrees, is embedded in particular times and places, and is shaped by the conditions in which it operates and by students' social relationships in higher education (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). These contributions strengthen conceptual clarity, and they inform this thesis in an alternative way. The aim here is not to reject existing models of student engagement or to replace them with another normative account of "good engagement". Rather, the focus is on how engagement is described and enacted in everyday campus life through students' lived accounts. This requires a perspective that can recognise both more visible and less visible forms of practice, while also attending to material and spatial organisation without imposing value judgments on different forms or degrees of engagement in practice (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Gourlay, 2017).

This is where a sociomaterial lens becomes useful. Rather than treating engagement as an individual attribute or a pre-defined category of behaviour, a sociomaterial perspective allows engagement to be analysed as practice: something enacted through relations among people, artefacts, spaces, temporal routines, and organisational procedures. This does not deny students' intentions, interpretations, or meanings. Rather, it makes it possible to examine how those meanings and actions are realised within the practical organisation of university life. For a study concerned with how students describe their engagement in everyday campus life, this shift from attribute to practice provides a more suitable theoretical starting point for analysing RQ1. Questions about why some forms of engagement become more visible, valued, or more consequential for recognition, opportunities, and outcomes are taken up in Section 3.3 through a Foucauldian lens on institutional and evaluative conditions.

3.3.2 A Sociomaterial Theorisation of Engagement in Practice

Building on the rationale above, this section develops the sociomaterial lens by theorising student engagement as a relational and practically organised phenomenon. The central analytic issue is not whether engagement exists as a fixed construct, but how it is enacted through the day-to-day organisation of studying, communicating, and participating across interconnected settings. Under contemporary university conditions, the objects, forms, and locations of engagement cannot be understood adequately through individual motivation or observable participation alone; they need to be analysed as effects of relations in practice.

A useful starting point is the question of the object of engagement. Ashwin and McVitty (2015) argue that the meaning of student engagement varies according to what students are understood to be engaging with, and their framework helps clarify both objects and degrees of engagement. Related work (Bryson, 2014; Coates, 2007; Klemenčič, 2015) also states that student engagement is not fixed but dynamic, temporal, and shaped by context and relationships. For this thesis, the importance of this literature is not only that it improves classification. It also opens a further question: if engagement varies by object, degree, time, place, and relationship, how are these forms and objects of engagement constituted in everyday practice as students describe and navigate them?

This question becomes more pressing in contemporary universities, where day-to-day study is increasingly organised through hybrid infrastructures. Digital and material elements are now deeply intertwined in campus life: learning management systems, mobile devices, messaging platforms, searchable resources, and digital documents are used alongside classroom routines, timetables, and institutionally organised expectations (Goodyear, 2020). In this context, engagement often unfolds across overlapping settings rather than within a single bounded site. The point is not simply that students use more digital tools than before. Rather, the organisation of studying, communicating, and participating is increasingly distributed across multiple spaces, times, media, and relations. This makes it difficult to analyse engagement adequately through

simple distinctions such as online/offline or physical/digital (Carvalho et al., 2017; Gourlay, 2015).

For this reason, the sociomaterial lens adopted in this thesis treats hybridity not as a fixed teaching mode (e.g., online versus face-to-face learning) but as a relational condition of practice: an ongoing recombination of people, spaces, artefacts, routines, and institutional expectations. In the literature on learning and space, studies are often separated into physical and virtual, as well as formal (learning that occurs in a classroom) and informal (student learning outside designated class time) learning spaces (Bligh & Crook, 2007). Much of the engagement literature in higher education separates students' physical and digital sites of study and treats them as distinct domains. These distinctions remain useful for institutional administration or policy classification, but they are often less adequate for analysing how students organise engagement in everyday settings. This separation can obscure the complexity of students' day-to-day practices, because students' engagement frequently moves across physical and digital relations in ordinary ways (Carvalho et al., 2017; Gourlay, 2015). For example, a student's classroom engagement may involve simultaneous or sequential relations with lecture content, personal notes, phones, messaging, digital files, and online search. A sociomaterial perspective makes these relations analytically visible without forcing them into pre-given categories.

A sociomaterial account is also useful because it provides a way to take less visible forms of engagement seriously. Scholars (Gourlay, 2015; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; Zepke, 2015, 2018, 2024) argue that the mainstream conception of student engagement privileges practices that are active, public, observable, verbal, and communal, while practices that do not align with these expectations – especially invisible engagement with knowledge (e.g. private reading, note-taking, digital searching and writing) - are more easily overlooked. Gourlay's (2015) critique of the "tyranny of participation" is useful here because it cautions against equating engagement with a narrow set of visible behaviours. For a qualitative study based on students' accounts of day-to-day campus life, this supports an analytic stance that remains open to quiet, fragmented,

intermittent, or private forms of engagement, rather than reading them prematurely as absence or deficiency.

The conceptual resources used here are informed by Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and related sociomaterial and posthuman work in education, but they are used as a conceptual orientation rather than a strict methodological programme. ANT is useful because it challenges the assumed primacy of human agency and emphasises the importance of “following the actors themselves” (Latour, 2005, p. 12), whether those actors are human or non-human. This does not deny human meaning-making. Rather, it means that what people can do, notice, coordinate, and sustain is shaped through relations with artefacts, infrastructures, bodies, spaces, texts, and institutional routines and procedures. Sociomaterial work in education has sought to reframe educational practices by emphasising the role of non-human elements, including material objects, devices, and physical artefacts and settings (Fenwick et al., 2011). Viewed through this lens, the resources and surroundings of the university are not treated as neutral context, but instead, they are recognised as “actors play a role in configuring the flow of day-to-day practice” (Gourlay, 2017, p. 32). Student engagement, therefore, is not regarded simply as an individual student’s volition or motivation, nor as students’ interactions with teachers, peers or groups. Instead, it can be understood as emerging from a constantly shifting network of actors, including the student, the class, the teacher, the institution, the lecture theatre, the laptop, the notepad, and other material and digital artefacts (Gourlay & Oliver, 2016; Latour, 2005).

In this sense, both human and non-human actors are treated as participating in the organisation of social practice. Here, agency is not used as a synonym for intentionality. Rather, it refers to how action is relationally distributed across human and non-human actors, and how practice is organised through their interdependence (Gourlay, 2015). In this thesis, a key analytic term is assemblage: a temporarily stabilised configuration of relations among human and non-human elements through which engagement is enacted in a particular situation. Adopting assemblage does not imply that networks will be mapped exhaustively or causally traced in a strong ANT sense. Instead, it functions as a

sensitising concept for interpreting interview accounts, helping to notice how students describe practical interdependencies among people, artefacts, organisational routines, and institutional procedures in day-to-day campus life (Fenwick et al., 2011; Gourlay, 2015; Latour, 2005). The point is not to personify objects, but to recognise that the material-semiotic arrangement of studying helps shape how engagement is enacted, sustained, paused, redirected, or fragmented.

Rethinking student engagement through a sociomaterial perspective also foregrounds the relational constitution of educational spaces (Gourlay & Oliver, 2016). Research on higher education has long noted that learning spaces are under-analysed in accounts of student experience (Goodyear et al., 2018; Temple, 2008). More recent work has shown that the expansion of digital education has not made physical space irrelevant; if anything, it has renewed attention to how physical and digital spaces are connected in practice (Bligh, 2019; Bligh & Crook, 2007). A sociomaterial perspective, therefore, does not start by treating classrooms, libraries, accommodation, or online platforms as separate, self-contained categories. Instead, space is understood as something enacted through practice and through relations among people, artefacts, institutional routines, and other spaces (Gourlay & Oliver, 2016). This is also consistent with Massey's (2005) relational account of space as always under construction and constituted through multiple, intersecting trajectories:

We recognise space as the product of interrelations: as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny...We recognise space as always under construction. Precisely because space on this reading is a product of relations – between, relations which are necessarily embedded in material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far. (Massey, 2005, p. 9)

For this thesis, this has direct implications for how the “where” of engagement is approached in RQ1. Where is not treated simply as a physical location, although

location still matters. Rather, it is approached as a relational question about how engagement is organised across connected settings, and how spaces become meaningful as engagement spaces through use, coordination, and institutional expectations. In this sense, engagement spaces are always in the making (Massey, 2005). This perspective helps avoid a premature separation between learning spaces and non-learning spaces, especially where students' study practices move across multiple campus sites, digital platforms, and social communication channels in ordinary ways.

A lecture hall provides a useful theoretical illustration. Traditional lecture-based classes are often positioned in opposition to online learning. However, in many universities, lectures are already hybrid assemblages (Gourlay, 2012). Teachers use laptops, projectors, and PowerPoint slides; students also bring or use laptops and mobile phones, and may use online search during the class. Technology and digital media can extend students' objects and forms of engagement beyond the physical lecture to a variety of other activities, such as reading and searching alternative resources online, messaging others, or working on unrelated tasks. From a sociomaterial perspective, digital devices are not merely tools used by students; they also participate in shaping what students can attend to, how they move between tasks, how they access resources, and what forms of engagement become possible in that situation (Gourlay & Oliver, 2016). Therefore, the analytic question moves beyond whether students are engaged in a lecture and asks how engagement is enacted in that setting: who students engage with, what forms that engagement takes, and how these are shaped through relations among classroom norms, devices, bodies, timings, and related material and organisational elements.

This sociomaterial perspective is also useful for bringing AI-related practices into view. AI is becoming an increasingly visible presence in students' lives, and students engage with it in diverse ways. Posthuman and sociomaterial perspectives allow AI to be treated as a non-human actor, or as part of an assemblage within the engagement network, rather than as an external addition to an otherwise stable notion of engagement. However, existing research on students' engagement with AI in higher education remains relatively limited, and

much of it focuses on assessment-related uses or specific task interactions rather than students' broader everyday engagement with AI in campus life. Scholarship on AI in education suggests that automation and data-driven systems are reshaping educational practice and the conditions under which activity is organised and reorganised (Williamson & Eynon, 2020). Accordingly, in this thesis, AI is treated as part of the sociomaterial assemblages through which everyday campus engagement is enacted. How such practices are identified, valued, and shaped within evaluative and governance arrangements is addressed in Section 3.4 through a broader lens of power and governmentality.

Taken together, this sociomaterial lens repositions student engagement as an emergent, relational, and practically organised phenomenon. It supports analysis of engagement as something enacted across assemblages of people, space, artefacts, infrastructures, and routines, rather than as a property located primarily in the individual student. It also provides a way of analysing hybrid and less visible forms of engagement without reducing them to absence or deficiency. In this thesis, the sociomaterial lens supports RQ1 by widening the analytic scope beyond a purely human-centred view to include non-human actors, treating "where" as relational and enacted, and describing forms of engagement as diverse, hybrid, and situation-sensitive practices. It therefore offers the conceptual basis for addressing RQ1 in a way that remains sensitive to the complexity of everyday campus practice and to how students describe and navigate engagement in their own terms. Section 3.3.3 clarifies how this lens is used in the present study, including its compatibility with the study's phenomenological interview design and its relevance to the Chinese university context.

3.3.3 Using the Sociomaterial Lens in the Present Study

In this thesis, the sociomaterial lens is used as an analytic orientation rather than as a standalone methodology. This study is grounded in a phenomenological approach and uses semi-structured interviews to examine how students describe their engagement in everyday campus life (see Chapter 4). Accordingly, sociomaterial concepts are used here as sensitising concepts for interpretation,

helping to identify how participants describe relations among people, artefacts, spaces, and institutional procedures in practice. This does not involve tracing networks exhaustively in a strong ANT sense, nor does it aim to produce a complete map of all human and non-human relations. Instead, the lens supports close reading of lived accounts by making visible how engagement is organised through practical interdependencies in day-to-day university life.

Used in this way, the sociomaterial lens strengthens the analysis of RQ1 without replacing participants' own meanings with a pre-defined theoretical template. It helps widen the analytic scope of "who" beyond a purely human-centred view by allowing attention to non-human actors and artefacts as part of the organisation of practice. It also supports a relational understanding of "where", treating engagement spaces not simply as fixed locations but as settings made meaningful through use, coordination, and institutional expectations. Likewise, it helps describe forms of engagement as diverse and situation-sensitive, including visible and less visible, individual and collective, and digitally mediated as well as physically situated practices. This is important for the present study because the aim is to understand how students describe and navigate engagement in their everyday lives, rather than to assess their practices against a single mode of "good" engagement.

This analytic orientation is particularly useful in the Chinese university context addressed in this study. Everyday campus life is often organised within relatively strong institutional routines and boundaries, while students' practices also extend across digital platforms, mobile devices, and online resources. In this sense, engagement may be institutionally bounded yet practically extended. A sociomaterial lens is useful because it can attend to this practical organisation of engagement across campus sites and digital infrastructures without assuming that physical and digital domains are separate in students' lived experience. Although research on student engagement in China is extensive, studies that focus on students' day-to-day engagement in practice, especially through a sociomaterial perspective, remain relatively limited. One recent ongoing study by Cheng (2024) applies a sociomaterial lens to Chinese university students' digital practice across teaching-focused and research-focused universities. However,

there remains a need for fine-grained accounts grounded in students' lived experiences on campus. The present study therefore uses this lens to support a fine-grained account of how engagement is described and enacted in everyday campus life.

The study focuses on undergraduates at one public university in China in order to provide a relatively consistent institutional and infrastructural context for analysing variation in engagement practices. This is an analytic choice about contextual coherence rather than a claim to representativeness, and the methodological rationale for site selection and sampling is discussed in Chapter 4. The sociomaterial lens is adopted here partly because earlier work, especially by Gourlay (2015) and Gourlay and Oliver (2016), offers a useful basis for analysing students' accounts of learning with technology. Their work provides a valuable way of analysing how engagement, space, and technology are relationally constituted in practice. However, the purpose here is not to replicate their study in a new setting. Instead, this thesis uses a sociomaterial lens for interpreting interview accounts to understand Chinese undergraduate engagement more broadly as it is enacted in everyday campus life, including but not limited to digital study practices.

Overall, drawing on previous research (e.g., Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Bryson, 2014; Coates, 2007; Gourlay, 2015; Gourlay & Oliver, 2016), this study adopts a sociomaterial lens to understand and investigate student engagement in ways that move beyond ideological categories or abstract conceptions toward a more "fine-grained ethnographically derived sensibility which allows for the qualitative, the messy, the hybrid and the emergent" (Gourlay, 2015, p. 408), without implying an ethnographic methodology in the present study. It supports the descriptive and interpretive aims of RQ1 by keeping the analysis close to students' lived accounts of everyday campus practice. Section 3.4 develops a complementary Foucauldian lens to analyse how such practices are recognised, valued, and shaped within wider evaluative and governance arrangements.

3.4 Power, Discipline, and Governmentality: A Critical Lens on Conditions Shaping Engagement

3.4.1 A Foucauldian Starting Point: Relational and Productive Power

This thesis draws on a Foucauldian understanding of power to analyse how student engagement is shaped by institutional conditions and everyday practices, rather than treating engagement as a direct expression of individual motivation. In this view, power is not primarily something that some actors own and others lack. It is relational and exercised through routine practices, forms of knowledge, and standards that shape what becomes normal, desirable, and possible (Foucault, 1980). This matters in universities because engagement is not only encouraged through ideals such as participation, initiative, or commitment. It is also organised through timetables, assessment procedures, administrative routines, and expectations about what counts as appropriate student conduct. These arrangements enable certain actions while also narrowing what is recognised as legitimate engagement. Power, therefore, does not simply constrain; it also produces norms and subject positions through which students come to recognise what is expected of them (Foucault, 1977). While the sociomaterial lens foregrounds how engagement is enacted in practice across people, spaces, and artefacts, a Foucauldian lens attends to how norms and evaluative arrangements shape what engagement can count as, and with what consequences for recognition and opportunity.

Foucault's analysis is closely tied to power-knowledge relations. Institutional classifications and evaluations do not simply report performance; they also produce authoritative descriptions of what counts as progress, competence, or achievement (Foucault, 1980). Over time, these descriptions can appear self-evident. This is relevant to engagement because categories such as active participation, professional development, or student voice can serve as standards that shape how students are judged and how students judge themselves. Therefore, the analytic focus is not whether engagement is good or bad in the

abstract, but how specific norms of engagement are produced, made credible, and sustained within specific institutional logics.

Discipline is one key mechanism within this account. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) describes disciplinary power as operating through arrangements that make individuals visible, comparable, and correctable. It works through routine techniques such as examination, surveillance, and normalisation. These techniques are relevant to higher education because they translate educational activity into observable conduct and recordable outcomes, creating a field in which students can be assessed and positioned relative to expectations. The panopticon is useful here as an analytical metaphor: it illustrates how the possibility of visibility can induce self-regulation even without continuous, direct oversight (Foucault, 1977). The point is not to equate universities with prisons, but to highlight how visibility and evaluation can shape conduct through ordinary institutional procedures. In this thesis, discipline is used to analyse how visibility, examination, and normalisation shape conduct within university routines.

Governmentality extends this analysis beyond disciplinary settings to the wider rationalities and techniques through which conduct is guided. Foucault uses “governmentality” to describe forms of power that work by shaping how individuals understand themselves and act upon themselves, often through norms, expertise, incentives, and calculative practices (Foucault, 1991). Governmentality studies have developed this approach by analysing how programmes of rule operate through problematisations and technologies that seek to make conduct governable (Dean, 2010; Rose & Miller, 1992). In higher education, this directs attention to how students may come to treat engagement as an object of self-management: planning time, managing risks, and aligning everyday choices with institutional cues about what is worthwhile (Rose, 1999). In this thesis, governmentality is used to analyse how students are encouraged to govern themselves through responsibility, calculation, and self-improvement.

Foucault’s lectures on neoliberalism are often read as anticipating the rise of an “entrepreneurial” subject, encouraged to treat capacities and choices as forms of capital requiring continuous investment and improvement (Foucault, 2008). In

contemporary universities, this helps to explain why engagement can be framed as responsibility, employability, and self-optimisation rather than only as learning or belonging. The lens, therefore, supports analysis of how students may be positioned as subjects who are expected to govern themselves in relation to assessment regimes, opportunity structures, and expectations of future competitiveness (Dean, 2010; Rose, 1999).

Analytically, these concepts are used as sensitising concepts that guide interpretation without implying a single-cause model (Rose & Miller, 1992). For the purpose of RQ2, this thesis retains the familiar language of “enablers” and “barriers” as a heuristic, but it does not treat influencing conditions as separable variables with stable positive or negative effects. Instead, the analysis attends to how institutional and evaluative arrangements organise possibilities for engagement by shaping what becomes visible, valued, and governable, without presuming stable enabling or constraining effects. The empirical analysis will examine how such dynamics may be enacted and negotiated in specific situations rather than assuming a binary causal logic in advance.

3.4.2 Engagement as a Governance Technology: Audit Culture, Performativity, and Data-Based Visibility

Critical scholarship on higher education has shown how universities have been shaped by audit, accountability, and performance regimes. These regimes intensify demands for evidence, reporting, and comparability, and they can reshape what institutions prioritise and how individuals come to recognise good work (Power, 1997; Shore & Wright, 1999). Within this context, student engagement can be treated not only as a descriptive term but also as a governance object: an issue rendered definable, measurable, and actionable for institutional management. The analytic point is not that engagement is inherently undesirable; rather, its meaning and value can be shaped by what accountability frameworks make visible and countable.

A useful route into this argument is performativity in Ball’s sense: a regime of judgement in which practices are organised around being demonstrable,

comparable, and accountable through indicators (Ball, 2003). Here, performativity refers to indicator-driven judgement (Ball, 2003), which can encourage display-oriented forms of compliance. In this regime, engagement can be reworked as performance for evaluation: both a metricised expectation (what counts in assessment) and a presentational one (what can be shown as evidence). Visibility then becomes a basis for value, and actors are oriented towards producing evidence that aligns with evaluative requirements. As a result, recognised forms of engagement may narrow towards activities that leave clear traces and can be rendered as auditable performance. Engagement, in other words, risks being defined through its auditability – its capacity to be evidenced, reported, and verified through records – rather than through its educational significance. This aligns with critiques of the “tyranny of participation”, which question why visible participatory behaviours are treated as benchmarks of engagement (Gourlay, 2015).

Critical work on student engagement has explicitly linked participation agendas to these evaluation logics. Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) argue that student engagement initiatives can become entangled with managerial priorities, including performativity and surveillance, and may be used to secure institutionally preferred behaviours rather than support broader educational purposes. Their critique is valuable here because it frames engagement as something assembled through institutional priorities, incentives, and evaluation routines, rather than as a neutral indicator of student commitment. This does not require treating engagement policies as primarily managerial; it invites attention to how they define engagement and shape everyday conduct.

Audit scholarship makes a closely related point: measurement and verification do not merely record reality; they can help to produce it. Power (1997) shows how audit practices create rituals of verification that change priorities and behaviours by demanding documentary evidence. Shore and Wright (1999) similarly describe audit culture as a governing logic that extends managerial oversight into everyday academic life. Together, these accounts help explain why engagement agendas can drift towards evidence production. This is not only a matter of individual choice, but also a consequence of institutional credibility and

opportunity allocation being tied to what can be documented, displayed, and compared.

A further development is the datafication of higher education: the translation of activity into data traces that can be aggregated, compared, and acted upon. Digital platforms increasingly convert participation into traces, metrics, and dashboards, and this extends the scope of what can be recorded and reviewed. Williamson (2017) argues that educational data infrastructures are part of governance arrangements: they are not neutral tools but make certain forms of activity legible and actionable through measurement, comparison, and optimisation. Here, legibility refers to activity made interpretable and actionable for decision-making. Selwyn (2019) similarly questions the assumptions embedded in learning analytics and highlights how data-driven monitoring can reshape relationships and expectations, even when framed in terms of support and improvement. The issue, therefore, is not technology in the abstract, but the institutional uses of representation: which activities become visible in data form, what interpretations are authorised, and what interventions follow (Selwyn, 2019; Williamson, 2017). In Foucauldian terms, data-based visibility can extend examination into routine activity by expanding what is recordable and how conduct can be evaluated (Foucault, 1977).

Taken together, these strands clarify how engagement can be governed through the production of visibility. Building on the Foucauldian account outlined above, audit and performativity explain why institutions and individuals orient towards what can be evidenced and compared (Ball, 2003, 2012; Power, 1997). Engagement critiques highlight how these dynamics can narrow the meaning of engagement by privileging institutionally legible forms of participation (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017). Datafication extends these processes by making visibility infrastructural, as participation is increasingly mediated through systems that record and render activity measurable (Selwyn, 2019; Williamson, 2017). Therefore, this lens provides a set of concepts for analysing how evaluative and governance arrangements organise possibilities for engagement, while leaving the empirical demonstration of these dynamics to the findings and discussion chapters. Importantly, this lens does not presume that students'

engagement is reducible to audit logics, nor that institutional arrangements are experienced uniformly as oppressive; rather, it provides resources for analysing how visibility, recognition, and self-management may be organised and negotiated in practice.

3.4.3 Hybrid Governance in Chinese Higher Education: Situating Engagement Beyond a Western Neoliberal Template

Much of the critical literature on student engagement has been developed in relation to Western higher education systems shaped by neoliberal reforms. In these settings, marketisation, competitive positioning, and indicator-based accountability have become influential in organising what institutions prioritise and what individuals come to recognise as valued conduct. This literature is analytically productive, but it can become restrictive if it is treated as a universal template. For this thesis, the task is therefore not to abandon neoliberal critiques, but to situate them within a governance context in which multiple rationalities operate together and neoliberalisation does not fully explain how universities are steered. Building on the governmentality lens outlined above, neoliberalism can be read as an “art of government” that reshapes how value and responsibility are organised and how individuals are expected to regulate themselves (Foucault, 2008). This is relevant in higher education because universities can promote subjectivities oriented towards self-management and self-improvement, alongside more familiar academic aims.

In Chinese higher education, market-oriented reforms and performance management have been introduced and expanded in ways that are closely entangled with state steering (policy direction and oversight) and national development agendas. Rather than displacing state power, these reforms can also serve as policy tools for pursuing and coordinating priorities. Mok (2021) captures this dynamic by arguing that higher education governance reforms in China have been actively managed and aligned with “Chinese characteristics”, rather than driven by a hands-off market logic. The key analytic question, therefore, is not whether China has simply “adopted” neoliberalism, but how

neoliberal techniques are combined with other governing logics and stabilised through institutional arrangements.

Comparative scholarship on East Asian higher education further underscores that strong public steering does not preclude competition and indicator-based governance; the two can coexist. For example, Marginson (2011) shows how systems in the region can be coordinated by the state while also being organised through positional competition and stratification. In such settings, rankings and comparable performance measures can function as key coordinating devices under conditions of active steering, rather than outcomes of market liberalisation alone. Related work on high participation systems also highlights that expansion can coexist with deepening hierarchy, as opportunities and rewards become structured through differentiated institutional status and competitive advantages (Marginson, 2016).

For this thesis, the implication is that engagement in Chinese universities is likely to be shaped within overlapping governing rationalities: a managerial rationality oriented to accountability and evidence, a strategic rationality linked to national development and talent agendas, and a disciplinary-normative rationality operating through institutional expectations of appropriate student conduct. This framing is not intended to pre-empt causal claims; rather, it clarifies the governance context in which engagement is defined, recognised, and made consequential. In this context, governance is expressed not only through policy discourse and performance indicators, but also through the routine organisation of campus life, including spatial boundaries and access arrangements. These features are relevant here not as cultural symbols in themselves, but as part of the institutional conditions through which student conduct, movement, and participation are organised.

Policy programmes illustrate how these logics can be assembled in concrete ways. The Double First-Class Initiative, for example, is explicitly framed as a national project to enhance higher education capacity and international competitiveness, and it operates through policy direction and periodic evaluation rather than through market competition alone (MoE, 2022). For this thesis, such

programmes matter not as background description, but as part of the governance environment that conditions what universities reward, what they make visible, and what they treat as consequential. The implication is not that governance is monolithic or internally coherent, but that different aims – developmental, competitive, administrative, and political – can be pursued through overlapping techniques of measurement, allocation, and regulation.

This hybrid configuration matters for theorising student engagement because it suggests that what becomes recognised as “engagement” is shaped through more than one organising logic. If engagement is interpreted only through a Western neoliberal lens, analysis may over-attribute governance effects to marketisation and under-attend to other rationalities that organise student life and institutional priorities. Conversely, if engagement is explained only through a state-centred lens, analysis may miss how competition, benchmarking, and performance indicators can reorganise everyday expectations and decisions. A Foucauldian approach is useful here because it does not presume a single driver (such as “the market”) and it does not reduce power to prohibition. Instead, it supports analysis of how heterogeneous techniques – rules, standards, evaluation routines, expert discourses, and incentive structures – shape what becomes normal, desirable, and worth investing in (Foucault, 1977, 1991). Therefore, the aim is not to decide whether engagement in China is “more” or “less” neoliberal than elsewhere, but to examine how multiple rationalities are assembled in the everyday organisation of university life, and how these arrangements configure what counts as engagement, what is recognised, and what is rewarded.

Positioning the context in this way helps the analysis avoid two reductions. First, it avoids reading Chinese universities through an unmodified Western neoliberal narrative. Second, it avoids replacing that narrative with an account that treats governance as uniformly state-imposed and internally consistent. Treating governance as hybrid keeps the conceptual frame open; it allows for the possibility that the same institutional technique can serve different rationalities at different times, and that its implications for engagement depend on how it is embedded in a specific arrangement. This contextual framing prepares the

ground for the next section, which clarifies how the Foucauldian lens will be used to interpret interview accounts without presuming stable enabling or constraining effects in advance.

3.4.4 Operationalising the Foucauldian Lens for RQ2

This section clarifies how the Foucauldian lens will be used in the analysis of interview accounts for RQ2. The aim is not to apply a fixed explanatory model, nor to treat power as an external force that simply constrains students. Instead, Foucauldian concepts are used as sensitising concepts that guide the interpretation of lived accounts, helping to analyse how institutional arrangements organise possibilities for engagement and how students orient themselves within those arrangements (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1977, 1991; Rose & Miller, 1992). This approach is compatible with the study's phenomenological design because it keeps the analytic focus on meanings as articulated in participants' accounts, while also attending to the conditions that make certain meanings and actions more plausible, recognisable, or consequential.

For RQ2, the analysis focuses on conditions – or more precisely, institutional and evaluative arrangements – rather than separable “factors” with stable effects. Here, arrangements refer to relatively durable ways of organising activity within the university, including rules and expectations, assessment and recording practices, platforms and reporting systems, opportunity allocation procedures, and wider accountability demands that shape what counts as worthwhile participation. The analytic emphasis is on how these arrangements produce standards of value and credibility, and how they shape what becomes visible, rewarded, or taken as evidence of being a “good” or “appropriate” student (Ball, 2003; Foucault, 1977; Power, 1997). Rather than assuming that an arrangement is either enabling or constraining, the analysis treats it as a configuration of possibility that can open some forms of engagement while simultaneously narrowing others.

In interpreting interview narratives, the lens directs attention to three linked processes. First, it examines how norms of engagement are produced and

encountered: how students describe what is expected, what is treated as “normal”, and what is taken to be valuable or risky. Second, it attends to the mechanisms through which engagement becomes governable – such as indicators, records, certificates, logs, and comparable outputs – because these practices shape what engagement can count as in institutional terms and how it is to be demonstrated (Ball, 2003; Power, 1997; Williamson, 2017). Third, it analyses how students’ conduct is shaped through self-management and calculation: how they talk about planning time, managing risks, prioritising tasks, and aligning choices with institutional cues about what is worth investing in (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1991, 2008). Rather than classifying students as simply active or passive, the analysis attends to how engagement is negotiated under norms, expectations, and evaluative pressures – how students manage time and energy, calibrate visibility, and position themselves in relation to what counts and what is risky.

The operationalisation also clarifies how the thesis handles the language of “enablers” and “barriers”. The terms may be retained as a familiar heuristic, but the analytic commitment is to treat engagement conditions as relational and context-dependent, rather than as variables with one-directional cause-and-effect relationships. A condition may enable engagement by making expectations clear or by providing access to recognised opportunities, while also constraining engagement by intensifying visibility demands, narrowing what is recognised, or redirecting effort towards what is auditable. The empirical analysis will therefore attend to how these tensions are articulated and negotiated in specific situations, without presuming a binary causal logic in advance.

Finally, this section prepares the ground for integration with the sociomaterial lens. Many of the governing arrangements described above operate through concrete settings and artefacts – spaces, timetables, platforms, records, and devices – so the analysis remains attentive to how power is enacted through the material-semiotic organisation of everyday practice. This also supports later analysis of how engagement is framed as worthwhile, how particular forms of participation become valued, and how engagement shifts across situations in relation to evaluative and visibility arrangements. Section 3.4 will bring the two lenses into

dialogue by clarifying their complementary roles, while the empirical chapters remain focused on participants' lived accounts.

3.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the theoretical lenses used in this thesis by developing a sociomaterial lens and a Foucauldian lens on power, discipline, and governmentality as complementary analytic resources. Section 3.2 showed why a sociomaterial perspective is useful for analysing student engagement as an emergent and practically organised phenomenon, and for supporting RQ1 by widening attention to who students engage with, where engagement is organised, and what forms engagement takes in everyday campus life. Section 3.3 then developed a Foucauldian lens to analyse the conditions shaping engagement, reframing enablers and barriers as relational and context-dependent rather than fixed variables, and situating this analysis in the hybrid governance context of Chinese higher education.

Taken together, these two lenses offer complementary analytic resources that can address both engagement as lived practice and the institutional and evaluative conditions through which engagement is recognised and shaped. They are used in a complementary rather than sequential way: the sociomaterial lens helps analysis remain close to participants' accounts of day-to-day engagement and the practical organisation of campus life, while the Foucauldian lens provides conceptual tools for interpreting how those practices are valued, made visible, and governed within wider evaluative and institutional arrangements. With these lenses in place, the next chapter turns to the study methodology and explains how the phenomenological research design and semi-structured interviews were developed to investigate Chinese undergraduates' everyday engagement on campus.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Overview

The previous chapters reviewed the relevant literature and developed the theoretical lenses guiding this study, leading to the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways do students describe their engagement?

- a) Who do they engage with?
- b) Where do they engage?
- c) What forms does the engagement take?

RQ2: What are the enablers and barriers to student engagement?

This chapter outlines the study's methodology, presenting the methods that were selected to facilitate a deeper understanding of undergraduates' engagement on campus in terms of their day-to-day practices. The study adopts a qualitative design with a hermeneutic-phenomenological orientation and uses semi-structured interviews.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 4.2 focuses on my philosophical worldview and how the theoretical lenses shaped the development of the research. Section 4.3 discusses the research design, including the qualitative approach, phenomenological orientation, interview method, and sampling strategies. Section 4.4 describes the pilot study and discusses how its results informed the design and implementation of the main study interviews. Section 4.5 outlines the data collection process, detailing the format and practical considerations of the interviews. Next, Section 4.6 describes the data treatment process, explaining the transcription and translation procedures, as well as the coding and analysis of the data. Section 4.7 examines the study's qualitative rigour and trustworthiness, addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical considerations are discussed in Section 4.8, while Section 4.9 concludes with a summary of the chapter.

4.2 Philosophical Worldview

This study draws on Creswell and Creswell's (2018) definition of "philosophical worldview" as "a general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of the research that a researcher brings to a study" (p. 44). I use this term to articulate both my ontology (how the researcher understands the nature of reality) and epistemology (how that reality can be known).

In this study, I adopt a constructivist ontological stance, recognising that individuals seek to interpret and make sense of the world in which they live. Social constructivists contend that subjective meanings emerge through social interaction and are shaped by historical and cultural norms (Cohen et al., 2007). These meanings are diverse and are constructed through lived experience rather than being objectively fixed. In line with this stance, this study is broadly located within an interpretivist-constructivist qualitative tradition in that it is concerned with how participants make sense of their lived experience. At the same time, the study is informed by sociomaterial sensitivity which treats these experiences as organised not only through social meanings but also through relations with spaces, artefacts, technologies, and institutional arrangements. I acknowledge that contemporary university engagement is multifaceted, incorporating both face-to-face interactions and online activities. Although this study focuses on students' engagement as organised in students' everyday campus life, it also takes online interactions into consideration, especially where these are embedded in campus-based study, communication, and social practice. These interactions occur through institutionally provided platforms and publicly accessible online resources, both of which are embedded in their campus experience.

To access these constructed realities, I take an interpretivist epistemological stance rather than a positivist one. Positivism assumes that facts are value free and can be directly measured through objective tests, leading to explanations and generalisations based on scientific laws (Bryman, 2012). This position underpins much of the large-scale survey research on student engagement. In contrast, my aim is to explore and interpret individuals' lived experiences from

their own perspectives, identifying the meaning they construct from the conditions and circumstances through which their engagement is shaped. Given “the immense complexity of human nature and the elusive and intangible quality of social phenomena” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 11), interpretivism offers a more appropriate foundation for in-depth exploration.

However, it is important to recognise that complete objectivity is unattainable; any analysis of reality is itself interpretative and shaped by the researcher’s experiences, disciplinary background, and interpretive standpoint. As Giddens (1984) observes, social research operates within a double hermeneutic: researchers interpret a world that has already been interpreted by its inhabitants, and social scientific concepts may in turn enter that world and shape those interpretations. In this study, this reflexive understanding reinforces the interpretivist position. Participants’ accounts are treated neither as transparent facts nor as purely subjective expressions detached from context, but as situated interpretations of lived experience. Phenomenology provides the overall orientation to lived experience and meaning, while the sociomaterial and Foucauldian lenses provide interpretive resources for analysing how those experiences are organised and shaped in practice.

My position as a Chinese-speaking researcher also shaped both access to the field and the interpretation of participants’ accounts. Linguistic and cultural proximity helped me to understand institution-specific terms, everyday expressions, and taken-for-granted features of Chinese university life that might otherwise have required substantial explanation. At the same time, this proximity did not remove the need for reflexivity. Familiarity can make certain assumptions appear self-evident and can reduce sensitivity to what remains unspoken or contextually implicit. For this reason, I treated participants’ accounts as requiring careful interpretation rather than assuming immediate transparency. Reflexive memo-writing, repeated engagement with the transcripts, and continual checking of interpretations against the dataset were therefore important in helping me remain attentive to both familiarity and distance in the analytic process.

4.3 Research Design

4.3.1 Qualitative Approach

Building on the constructivist and interpretivist position outlined above, this study adopts a qualitative research approach. As White (2009, p. 221) notes, research design concerns the overall blueprint – the architecture – rather than the “nuts and bolts” involved in implementing that plan. Qualitative and quantitative approaches are underpinned by different logics, each with distinct strengths, and are suited to addressing different research aims (Bryman, 2012). Qualitative research, as Denzin and Lincoln (2018) note, enables the researcher to “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (p. 10). This approach aligns with the aim of the present study: to explore Chinese undergraduate engagement on campus in depth, focusing on how they understand and interpret their own experiences.

While qualitative studies are sometimes criticised for their relatively small sample sizes and limited statistical generalisability (Bryman, 2012), the purpose of this study is not to generate population-level claims. Instead, it seeks to produce rich, in-depth interview data that can support close analysis of how engagement is experienced and interpreted in everyday university life (Silverman, 2011). Although some aspects of engagement, such as time spent on learning activities or examination scores, can be measured quantitatively, my aim is not to establish statistical relationships. Rather, it is to understand the complexity of engagement as experienced, interpreted, and organised in participants’ day-to-day university lives. For this reason, this study adopts a qualitative design with a hermeneutic-phenomenological orientation and uses semi-structured interviews to explore how students describe their engagement, including who they engage with, where engagement takes place, what forms it takes, and what conditions appear to shape it.

4.3.2 Phenomenology

Given that this study aims to explore how Chinese undergraduates understand and interpret their engagement experiences, a phenomenological approach offers an appropriate methodological orientation. Phenomenology is concerned with “gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of meaning of our everyday experiences” (van Manen, 1997, p. 9) and seeks to identify “the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experience of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). In this study, phenomenology supports a focus on participants’ first-hand accounts and the meaning they attach to their engagement, while also attending to shared patterns of meaning across participants’ accounts.

Two principal traditions of phenomenology inform qualitative research: transcendental (descriptive) phenomenology and hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As Moustakas (1994) explains, transcendental phenomenology describes phenomena as they are perceived, setting aside the researcher’s preconceptions to ensure that everything is “pure” and “perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (p. 34). In comparison, hermeneutic phenomenology holds that description is inseparable from interpretation; researchers inevitably bring their own perspectives, which evolve through the analytical process (van Manen, 1997).

Given my constructivist ontological stance, I view the meaning of engagement as socially constructed and interpreted by participants within particular contexts. Likewise, as a researcher, I cannot fully set aside my own experiences, disciplinary background, and interpretive standpoint when analysing data. These assumptions align more closely with hermeneutic phenomenology, which recognises the interpretative role of the researcher in making sense of participants’ lived accounts not as transparent reports of experience, but as accounts whose meaning requires interpretation. At the same time, interpretations were developed through close engagement with participants’ accounts and were continually checked against the interview data to ensure that they remained grounded, plausible, and sensitive to the meanings participants

attached to their experiences. In this thesis, phenomenology functions primarily as an overall orientation to lived experience and meaning, rather than as a requirement to follow a single canonical phenomenological analytic procedure. This orientation is combined with reflexive thematic analysis as the main analytic approach, allowing the study to interpret patterns of meaning across participants' accounts while remaining grounded in participants' lived experience.

4.3.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

Given the interpretative nature of this study and its focus on participants' lived experiences, I selected semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. In phenomenological research, a common approach is to interview individuals "who have experienced the phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 77). Interviews enable participants to express their own interpretations of their experiences, while allowing researchers to ask follow-up questions to clarify, elaborate, or probe for deeper meanings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews balance the consistency of having a prepared set of questions with the flexibility to adapt the sequence, wording, and depth of inquiry according to the flow of conversation. This approach enabled participants to raise issues they considered important while ensuring that all core topics relevant to the research questions were addressed (Bryman, 2012). Compared with structured interviews, which follow a fixed set of questions, and unstructured interviews, which have no predetermined structure (Gray, 2018), the semi-structured format offers a balanced structure, making it particularly well suited to exploring varied aspects of engagement. In this study, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted. Although individual interviews are more time-consuming than group formats, in this study they facilitated open and detailed sharing, allowed each participant to speak at a comfortable pace, and enabled me to follow up on unclear responses or explore emergent themes in depth. This flexibility enhanced the depth, credibility, and trustworthiness of the data.

The interview schedule was informed by the literature and the study's theoretical lenses. Each interview began with warm-up questions to put the participants at ease, before progressing to broader and progressively more complex questions. The questions (see Appendix) were developed in line with Patton's (2015) typology, covering background and demographic questions, experience and behaviour questions, feeling questions, and opinion and values questions. This design ensured that all dimensions of the research questions were addressed while also allowing for the exploration of unanticipated but relevant topics.

4.3.4 Research Site

In qualitative research, the aim is to obtain an in-depth understanding of a central phenomenon rather than to generalise to a wider population. Thus, researchers purposefully select the context most likely to generate comprehensive and relevant findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The appropriateness of a research site is not determined by fixed rules but by its suitability for the research purpose (Bryman, 2012). As Bryman (2012) advises, the primary consideration is to identify sites that offer both the most valuable opportunities for understanding the phenomenon and reliable, convenient access. In line with this guidance, I selected the research site based on the following considerations.

First, China has over 3,000 higher education institutions, with notable regional disparities in economic development between the north and south, and between the eastern, central, and western regions (Han et al., 2023; Xia et al., 2023). Given the constraints of time, energy, and financial resources, it was not feasible to recruit a sufficient number of participants from multiple institutions across such varied settings. Furthermore, because this study explores students' engagement with both human and non-human actors, as well as their perceptions of engagement, it was important to retain a shared campus environment. Focusing on one institutional site, therefore, retained a shared institutional and infrastructural context, while still allowing participant diversity across regions and disciplines within the university. This approach allowed for meaningful comparisons of engagement practices within a consistent setting while reducing

the confounding effects that wider institutional differences might otherwise introduce.

Second, public universities in China operate within a highly centralised governance structure, guided by national policies and regulations that shape campus planning, curriculum frameworks, and administrative processes (Han & Xu, 2019). As a result, they share a number of structural similarities. With this broadly uniform system, X University was selected for its distinctive characteristics. Geographically located in the central region of China, it is often described as a bridge between the eastern and western parts of the country. Despite having fewer economic advantages than eastern universities, its Double First-Class status and comprehensive university profile attract students from across the nation. The student intake includes a substantial proportion of local students, as well as a diverse student cohort drawn from both eastern and western provinces and a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds. This diversity, within a single and consistent institutional environment, provided favourable conditions for investigating varied patterns of engagement.

Third, X University offers a particularly diverse engagement environment through its collegiate system, which is less common than more conventional accommodation arrangements in Chinese public universities. Under this system, students from different departments within the same faculty are allocated to mixed residential colleges. These colleges, rather than academic departments, form the organisational basis for accommodation, social activities, and many extracurricular opportunities. This arrangement creates a structured context in which students from different disciplinary backgrounds share living and social spaces. This collegiate system is particularly relevant to the present study, as it provides a distinctive institutional context for examining how these structural arrangements may shape, facilitate, or constrain student engagement. Although X University shares the core structural features of most Chinese public universities, its collegiate system introduces an additional institutional layer that enriches the context for exploring student engagement.

In addition to these site-selection considerations, it is also important to clarify the research site as a concrete engagement environment. This is not intended to repeat the macro-level discussion of Chinese higher education presented in Chapter 1, but to explain the material, spatial, digital, and organisational conditions within which students' day-to-day engagement was enacted. Many of the arrangements described below were not unique to X University but reflected features commonly found in campus-based universities in China.

The research site is a campus-based university environment in which study, residence, and a substantial part of students' everyday social life are organised within a relatively bounded institutional setting. Teaching buildings, student accommodation, libraries, canteens, and college spaces together form the main locations of students' daily activities. The campus itself has relatively clear physical boundaries, and some areas and buildings are subject to routine access management. Students' daily movement is therefore shaped not only by the academic timetable, but also by the spatial organisation of the campus and the practical arrangements governing entry and use. For the purposes of this study, the research site is thus understood not simply as a geographical location, but as a material and organisational environment through which students' engagement is structured in everyday practice.

Dormitory life also forms an important part of this engagement ecology. At the research site, undergraduate accommodation typically involves shared dormitory rooms, within which students sleep, study, use digital devices, and interact with roommates. Dormitories therefore function not only as residential spaces, but also as study spaces and social spaces. In material terms, dormitory rooms commonly follow a layout in which each student has a raised bed above a desk, and each room normally accommodates four to six students, so that private study, digital activity, personal rest, and shared living are closely intertwined within a limited shared space. In addition, some aspects of everyday student life are organised through shared service facilities and routine residential management, including access control, management staff, and card-based or fee-based use of certain facilities. These conditions are relevant not as incidental background

details, but as part of the practical organisation of students' time, movement, and daily life.

The collegiate system at X University also requires brief explanation because it is not merely a residential arrangement. In addition to accommodation, the colleges provide a further layer of community organisation, social connection, everyday support, and some co-curricular opportunities. Students therefore experience university life not only through their academic departments, but also through this additional institutional structure. This is analytically important because it helps shape peer contact, belonging, support relationships, and access to participation opportunities. Although collegiate systems are not found in all Chinese universities, they have been adopted by a growing number of institutions and have been encouraged in recent higher education reform initiatives (MoE, 2019, 2021).

Digital infrastructures form another important part of the site context. Students' engagement was organised not only through physical campus space, but also through a combination of institutionally provided internal platforms and widely used communication technologies. The university had its own internal digital learning platform, here anonymised as X-Moodle, through which students accessed course-related information, learning materials, and academic notices. Alongside this, students made frequent use of widely used communication platforms such as WeChat and QQ, as well as online meeting tools such as Tencent Meeting. Their day-to-day engagement was therefore often organised across interconnected physical and digital settings rather than within a purely face-to-face campus environment.

Importantly, digital participation at the research site was shaped not only by the presence of platforms and devices, but also by conditions of access and connectivity. Access to some internal university systems depended on the campus network or related internal digital infrastructure, and this access was not always entirely frictionless or cost-free. In practice, students often had to navigate the relationship between internal university access, paid campus internet services, mobile data, and the use of both internal and external platforms. Digital

engagement was therefore also structured by questions of connectivity, cost, bandwidth, convenience, and technical access. This point matters analytically because it shows that digital engagement was not simply available as an abstract possibility; it was materially and infrastructurally organised.

In some teaching spaces, the site also involved forms of digitally mediated visibility and monitoring. Some classrooms were equipped with cameras, and in certain cases students referred to more specific technologies associated with attendance, presence, or classroom attention. In this study, such arrangements are not treated as neutral background tools, but as part of the broader environment through which classroom participation may become visible, recordable, and potentially comparable. At this stage, however, the purpose here is simply to identify such arrangements as part of the site context rather than to make prior claims about their effects.

Finally, it is necessary to note that the evaluative environment at the research site extended beyond GPA and formal coursework alone. For readers unfamiliar with Chinese university settings, student evaluation may easily be understood primarily in terms of grades, ranking, or academic performance. However, participants' accounts suggested that academic achievement coexisted with other recognised and sometimes documented forms of participation. These included, for example, competitions, volunteering, social practice, innovation and entrepreneurship activities, skills development, physical exercise requirements, and other extracurricular or co-curricular forms of involvement. In other words, students did not orient themselves only to a single academic metric, but to a broader evaluative ecology in which different forms of visible and recognised participation could also matter. This evaluative context is introduced here not in order to make causal claims in advance, but because it provides an important background for interpreting how students later described worthwhile, useful, or consequential forms of engagement.

In addition to these material and institutional conditions, a small number of institutional roles also need to be clarified. At this stage, the most useful distinction is between the class director (*banzhuren*) and the residential college

counsellor. These roles are not identical and may differ in their responsibilities for academic support, administration, pastoral care, student management, and everyday coordination. The purpose of mentioning them here is not to offer a full taxonomy of university roles, but to provide sufficient orientation for understanding participants' accounts in later chapters.

4.3.5 Participant Sampling and Recruitment

This study focuses specifically on undergraduates. This focus is both substantive and methodological. Substantively, undergraduate study in Chinese public universities is often strongly organised around campus-based everyday life, including relatively dense timetables, shared residential arrangements, sustained peer contact, and participation in both curricular and co-curricular activities. Undergraduates are therefore particularly well placed for examining engagement as everyday campus practice and for analysing the campus as a material, organisational, and digital ecology. Compared with many postgraduate trajectories, undergraduate experience is more consistently embedded in the institutional routines, evaluative arrangements, and social relations of campus life. This focus is also consistent with a substantial body of student engagement research, which has often taken undergraduates as a central population of concern. Methodologically, concentrating on undergraduates helps maintain analytic coherence within a single-site qualitative design while still allowing meaningful variation across year groups, disciplines, gender, regional backgrounds, and residential arrangements. The decision to focus on undergraduates was therefore not intended to suggest that postgraduate engagement is unimportant, but to provide a clearer and more comparable field for developing a fine-grained account of engagement in everyday university life.

Given the temporal, dynamic, and situated character of engagement, a longitudinal design might have offered additional insight into change over time. However, constraints on access and the limited timeframe available for doctoral fieldwork meant that a longitudinal design was not feasible. Instead, a purposeful sampling strategy was used to include participants across all four years of undergraduate study and to maximise variation within the sample in terms of

gender, disciplinary background, regional origin, and residential college affiliation. The sample included both local students (from within the province) and non-local students. During the interviews, participants were also invited to reflect on earlier stages of their undergraduate experience, so that the study could incorporate a retrospective temporal dimension without adopting a longitudinal design. This strategy was intended not to achieve statistical representativeness, but to capture a wide range of engagement experiences within a shared institutional setting while retaining sufficient contextual coherence for in-depth qualitative analysis.

After receiving ethics approval from Lancaster University in December 2023, I began formal participant recruitment at X University. Recruitment materials, including a digital flyer and general information on the study, were posted on student-run social media platforms. These platforms are independently managed by students and open to both on-campus and off-campus audiences. I deliberately avoided distribution via university staff or official institutional channels to minimise potential power imbalances or perceived social distance, which could discourage participants from speaking openly during interviews and thus reduce the depth of data collected.

Within the first two weeks of posting the flyer, I received 13 responses from undergraduates across different years and disciplines. I contacted each of these students to explain the study in detail, and they all agreed to participate. I invited one fourth-year student from this group to take part in the pilot study, which was conducted after receiving ethics approval and before the main data collection. His imminent graduation and extensive university experience meant that he was well placed to provide constructive feedback on the interview design. The remaining 12 respondents formed the first group of participants for the main study.

Over the next three weeks, a further 28 students expressed interest in the study. By this stage, I had already collected preliminary demographic information from the first 12 respondents. This allowed me to purposively select participants from the second group in order to maximise diversity in the sample and avoid over-representing particular sub-groups. Six potential participants were therefore not

included in the final sample because their characteristics were already well represented in the sample.

By this stage, 30 participants had already been recruited. Although I continued to post the digital flyer on the student-run social media platforms, most of the new respondents overlapped with the existing 30 participants in terms of year of study, discipline, or other demographic characteristics. To reduce unnecessary duplication and access students from underrepresented groups, I stopped posting the flyer on those platforms. Instead, I invited existing participants to share the flyer and information on the study within their personal networks. This snowball sampling approach aimed to maximise the diversity of the sample. Although it did not achieve full coverage of all categories (e.g. year of study, disciplines, residential college), this approach allowed me to maximise the breadth of participant representation and reach participants beyond the immediate circle accessible through open social media posting.

In total, 40 participants were recruited, representing over two-thirds of the academic faculties at the research site, although not all subjects were covered. Recruitment ceased once the dataset had achieved sufficient depth, diversity, and analytic richness for the purposes of the study, and later interviews were contributing more elaboration than substantially new patterns. All participants who agreed to take part completed their interviews, and there were no withdrawals or missed appointments. While a few participants needed to reschedule, sometimes across different time zones, adjustments were made to ensure that every interview was conducted as planned. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the final sample, including participants' years of study, discipline, and gender. Other background characteristics, such as household registration and residential college affiliation, were also taken into account during sampling, but are not reported here in order to reduce the risk of participant identification. Pseudonyms are used throughout the thesis to protect participants' anonymity.

Table 4.1 Demographics for Main Study

Participant	Gender	Year	Discipline
1	F	2	Chinese Literature
2	F	2	Law
3	F	3	Energy and Power Engineering
4	M	3	Business Administration
5	M	3	Nuclear Engineering and Technology
6	M	2	Economics
7	F	4	Business Administration
8	F	2	Network and New Media
9	F	2	Finance
10	F	1	Economics
11	F	4	Network and New Media
12	M	4	Electronics
13	M	2	Microelectronics Science and Engineering
14	F	2	Industrial Design Engineering
15	F	2	Electronic and Information Engineering
16	F	2	Law
17	F	3	Economics
18	F	2	Network and New Media
19	F	3	Economic Statistics
20	M	3	Computer Science
21	M	3	Economics
22	F	1	Medicine
23	F	3	Automation
24	F	1	Medicine
25	M	1	Medicine
26	F	1	Social Studies

Table 4.1 Continued

27	M	1	Philosophy
28	M	1	Computer Science
29	F	1	Medicine
30	F	1	Mathematics
31	F	1	Business
32	F	4	Business Administration
33	M	3	Management
34	M	4	Civil Engineering
35	M	4	Big Data Management and Application
36	F	4	Law
37	M	2	Automation
38	F	4	Big Data Management and Application
39	F	4	Mathematics
40	M	4	Nuclear Engineering and Technology

4.4 Pilot Study

A pilot study is a small-scale study conducted prior to the main study to test the research instruments and ensure that they function effectively as a whole (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In qualitative research, a pilot study can help assess the feasibility of the chosen method, seek feedback to clarify and adjust the interview questions, estimate the approximate time needed for each interview, and allow the researcher to gain confidence in using the chosen method (Bryman, 2012).

Given that this study focuses on student engagement within a selected university campus, it was important for me to become familiar with the institutional environment and students' academic and social activities. Although I had visited

the campus in July 2023 during the open day for the public and reviewed its official website to gain a basic understanding of its organisational structures and online platforms, I needed to obtain a more current and nuanced understanding. The pilot interview was therefore valuable for both engaging directly with a student and gaining first-hand insight into daily campus life.

The pilot study was conducted at the end of December 2023, with a fourth-year undergraduate recruited in the first stage of participant selection. The interview was conducted in Chinese via a Tencent Meeting audio call due to geographical distance and was audio recorded with the participant's consent. The session lasted approximately 100 minutes. The pilot study was designed to address several aims, which are discussed below.

First, the pilot study served to test whether the English versions of the consent form and participant information sheet were accessible to participants. The pilot participant was able to understand both documents but inquired about the meaning of the term engagement. To avoid constraining his responses by providing an academic definition, I explained that the term is broad, has no single fixed meaning, and is generally associated with interaction and involvement. I also told him that he could disregard the specific term and instead focus on describing his everyday learning and social experiences on campus. Drawing on this experience, in the warm-up stage of the main study interviews, I ensured that participants understood the consent form and information sheet. I also clarified that engagement was being used in a broad sense, with the interviews focusing on participants' day-to-day academic and social lives.

Second, the pilot study tested the clarity, logical sequencing, and timing of the interview questions. It highlighted the importance of maintaining a logical flow, allowing sufficient response time, and approaching questions from the participant's perspective. Although the pilot interview exceeded the planned duration, this was largely due to the time spent discussing specific teaching roles and group activities in detail, which provided essential background for my main study interviews. This process also enabled me to become familiar with campus-specific terminology, including some terms not mentioned on the university's

official website (e.g. college counsellor, residential college counsellor, general counsellor, and career guidance counsellor). Additionally, the pilot interview provided me with a clearer understanding of how to anticipate potential follow-up questions and identify new lines of inquiry during the main study interview. Consequently, I anticipated that interviews in the main study would take approximately half to two-thirds of the time required for the pilot interview.

Third, the pilot interview indicated a need for minor rewording of certain interview questions, based on the participant's feedback, to avoid confusion or repetition. For example, the question "In your opinion, where does the learning take place, both formal and informal learning?" was described as sounding awkward in Chinese. I therefore split it into two questions and rephrased them in a more conversational style: one focusing on the participant's evaluation of the quality and suitability of formal learning opportunities (e.g. courses, extracurricular activities, teaching quality, learning materials) and the other exploring whether and how they sought additional learning opportunities outside of the formal curriculum.

The pilot interview was transcribed in Chinese and then translated into English, resulting in 13 pages of single-spaced text. My supervisor reviewed the translated transcript and confirmed that the research questions and interview questions were appropriate and capable of generating rich data. Given the significant workload of full translation, we decided that for the main study, I would only translate the quotations included in the final thesis.

4.5 Data Collection

The main study was conducted between January and April 2024, following the recruitment process and sampling strategy outlined in Section 4.3. It focused on the systematic collection of in-depth interview data from 40 participants. The overall approach to data collection was informed by the lessons learned from the pilot study, resulting in refinements to the interview design, including language choice, question formulation and sequencing, timing, and overall interviewing strategies.

All participants read the information sheet and digitally signed the consent form prior to their interviews. Consistent with the pilot study, interviews were conducted in Chinese to maximise clarity and allow participants to articulate their thoughts fully. This choice reflected the understanding that the language used in qualitative interviews can significantly influence the amount and richness of the data collected (Bryman, 2012).

The interviews were conducted individually via Tencent Meeting voice calls and were audio recorded. The online audio format facilitated participation from different geographical locations and offered flexibility in scheduling. Most interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, as planned. Several extended to between 90 minutes and two hours, and a small number reached about two and a half hours. Although these longer interviews increased the transcription workload, they reflected participants' willingness to share detailed accounts, thereby enriching the overall dataset.

The structure of each interview incorporated a short warm-up stage to build rapport, confirm that participants fully understood the participant information sheet and consent form, and invite them to ask any questions. In line with the insights from the pilot study, I clarified that engagement was being used in a broad, non-technical sense, with the focus on participants' day-to-day academic and social lives rather than adhering to any fixed definition. The warm-up questions included a brief self-introduction and casual conversation, before gradually progressing to more specific topics related to engagement. While the interview guide provided a common structure, the order of questions was adjusted as needed to follow the flow of the conversation. This flexibility allowed relevant, unanticipated issues raised by participants to be addressed while maintaining focus on the research objectives.

The semi-structured format also allowed for the use of various probing techniques – such as clarification, elaboration, and contrast probes – to elicit deeper and more detailed responses. When participants' narratives diverged from the research focus, I gently redirected them to bring the conversation back on track while maintaining an open and respectful atmosphere. During each

interview, key points were written down, and reflective notes were written immediately afterwards to capture both the substantive content and dynamics of the interaction.

No major sensitive issues directly related to the research topic arose during the interviews. However, some participants provided rich descriptions of their university life and shared photographs of study spaces, group discussion areas, and accommodation. These images, used with permission, served only to provide background understanding and were not included in the formal data analysis. I took care to ensure that such material did not contain identifiable information, in line with the ethical procedures outlined in Section 4.8.

4.6 Data Treatment

4.6.1 Data Transcription and Translation

Immediately after each interview, I organised my field notes and started familiarising myself with the data by transcribing it into written text. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to create a complete and accurate textual record for analysis (Cohen et al., 2007). The aim was to remain as faithful as possible to the original conversations, preserving the nuances of participants' accounts. It is vital for researchers to immerse themselves in the data to ensure they are familiar with both the depth and breadth of the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, I transcribed all the interviews (n=40) myself, word by word. Using a foot pedal allowed me to keep my hands free, enabling me to focus on typing while my feet controlled the audio rewind. Repetitions, incomplete sentences, and grammatical errors were retained, as these features can indicate emphasis, thought processes, or emotion; notable non-verbal elements such as long pauses and laughter were also recorded since tone and rhetoric may convey meaning beyond the literal wording (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). However, my own back-channel utterances (e.g. okay, um) were removed to avoid cluttering the transcript and because they were not analytically pertinent.

In the pilot study, fully translating entire transcripts into English proved highly time-consuming with limited additional analytic benefit. Therefore, in the main study, all 40 interviews were transcribed in Mandarin, and the analysis was conducted with the transcripts remaining in Chinese. Coding, memo-writing, and the development of analytical labels were undertaken flexibly across Chinese and English. This mixed-language approach helped me remain close to participants' original meanings while also supporting the later development of analysis and thesis writing in English. At the final writing stage, key codes and analytical terms were translated and standardised in English for presentation in the thesis. Consistent with Bryman's (2012) guidance, only the quotations selected for inclusion in the final thesis were translated into English. I carried out the translations myself as both researcher and translator, which enabled close attention to interpretive nuance, cultural meaning, and context (Temple & Edwards, 2002). The guiding principle was meaning equivalence rather than word-for-word correspondence. Where there was no precise lexical match, I aimed for the closest satisfactory rendering of what participants intended to convey. For culturally specific or institution-specific terms without a direct English equivalent, I either retained the Chinese term with a brief explanation or used the nearest functional English equivalent and noted the original term in parentheses where appropriate.

In practice, most of the interview material was relatively easy to translate from Chinese to English. As Chinese is my first language, translating interview material into English required careful attention to idiomatic accuracy and interview nuance. First, my initial translations were often relatively direct and occasionally required revision for grammatical clarity and more idiomatic expression. The intended meaning remained clear throughout, and no significant problems arose in relation to functional understanding or equivalence. Second, I consulted relevant sources to ensure accurate translation of certain roles and task assignments that are specialised or culturally specific in Chinese society, providing the corresponding Chinese expressions as annotations where appropriate.

4.6.2 Coding and Data Analysis

The Chinese transcripts were imported into NVivo 12 for systematic coding and reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's approach to thematic analysis (2006, 2021), but it was adapted to the interpretive aims of this study rather than followed as a rigid procedural template. This was consistent with the hermeneutic-phenomenological orientation of the research, which treats participants' accounts as interpretive descriptions of lived experience rather than as transparent reports of reality. Although the analysis was largely data-led, it was not entirely theory-neutral. The sociomaterial and Foucauldian lenses informed analytic attention in selective and sensitising ways and were used more explicitly at later stages to deepen the interpretation of patterns related to materiality, spatial organisation, visibility, evaluation, and power. Although Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis in six recursive phases, the analytic process in this study is presented here in four broad and partly overlapping stages for clarity. In practice, the analysis was iterative and reflexive rather than strictly linear, involving continuous movement between data, codes, and themes.

The first phase involved becoming thoroughly familiar with the data. After transcribing the data, I read each transcript multiple times, paying particular attention to participants' responses to key research questions. I added annotations directly to the transcripts in NVivo 12 to record initial observations, possible links to the existing literature, and tentative ideas for themes (Bryman, 2012). This stage also involved listening to selected audio excerpts to capture nuances of tone and emphasis that might be relevant for interpretation. These memos and annotations served as reference points in later stages of the analysis, helping to crystallise ideas and avoid losing track of emerging lines of thought.

In the second stage, I began exploratory coding with four transcripts, selecting one participant from each year of study whose interview offered substantial detail in relation to the research questions. These transcripts were used to generate an initial and provisional set of working codes. This early coding did not function as a fixed coding frame; rather, it provided a starting point that was subsequently

revised, expanded, and reorganised through coding the full dataset. As the analysis progressed, new codes continued to emerge and earlier codes were refined, merged, or discarded. Some codes were accompanied by brief descriptions to support consistency and transparency in use, and the context of coded extracts was retained to facilitate later theme development. Memos were used throughout to document analytical decisions, uncertainties, and reflections on emerging patterns. Throughout the analysis, I compared coded extracts within and across transcripts to maintain a close and iterative relationship between the codes and the data they represented. NVivo facilitated this process by allowing for the efficient organisation of nodes, the retrieval of all excerpts linked to a code, and the comparison of coding patterns across participants (Bryman, 2012). At this stage, coding remained closely grounded in participants' accounts, but was also informed by the study's theoretical lenses in sensitising ways. For example, when coding who was involved in engagement, I attended not only to human actors, such as teachers, peers, and counsellors, but also to non-human actors, such as digital platforms, classroom technologies, online systems, and material arrangements that shaped students' engagement practices.

The third phase focused on categorising codes and identifying potential themes. Codes that did not clearly belong to a theme were temporarily put in a "residual category" (Robson, 2011, p. 481) for later review. To reduce the risk of losing the social context of the data extracts when they were removed from the transcript, I relied on my familiarity with the dataset developed in the first phase and frequently compared extracts within and across themes and sub-themes. Themes were developed through grouping conceptually related coded concepts, refining their boundaries, and ensuring that each was internally coherent and distinct from the others.

In the fourth phase, I reviewed and refined the themes at two levels. First, all coded data extracts within each theme were reviewed to see whether they formed a coherent pattern; second, the validity of each theme and sub-theme was reviewed in relation to the entire dataset to determine whether they sufficiently reflected the data as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process also involved checking each theme against the research questions to confirm its

relevance and analytical value. Extracts that did not fit any theme were either reassigned or discarded, and those in the residual category were revisited to determine whether they warranted a new theme or could be integrated into existing ones. The entire dataset was then re-read to ensure that the final thematic structure captured the central patterns of meaning in the participants' accounts. At this stage, the developing themes were brought into closer dialogue with the study's dual theoretical lenses. The sociomaterial and Foucauldian lenses were used not as fixed coding categories, but as interpretive resources to deepen understanding of how engagement was enacted in practice and shaped by material arrangements, relations, and broader institutional conditions of power.

Throughout the coding and analysis process, I remained conscious of my position as a researcher and the potential influence of my disciplinary background, prior knowledge, and assumptions on the interpretation of data. To support reflexivity, I engaged in regular reflexive memo-writing to record my reasoning for coding decisions, note any uncertainties, and revisit these reflections during the later stages of analysis. I also compared my developing themes with the raw data to ensure that the interpretations remained closely grounded in participants' accounts and were continually checked against the dataset. Because the coding was conducted by a single researcher, I periodically revisited earlier transcripts and previously coded extracts during later stages of analysis to check for interpretative drift and to maintain analytic coherence across the dataset.

4.7 Qualitative Rigour

In qualitative research, the concepts of validity and reliability are often reframed in terms of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness comprises four interrelated criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria were used to assess the rigour of this study and to address its potential limitations.

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings are trustworthy from the perspective of participants and within the context studied. In this research, credibility was enhanced through in-depth semi-structured interviews, verbatim

transcription, and close engagement with the dataset across transcription, coding, and analysis. The analysis was grounded in the lived experiences of Chinese undergraduates at the selected university and supported by the use of verbatim transcripts. After transcription, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts and clarify ambiguities where necessary. This process was used primarily to improve the accuracy of the transcript record and allow participants to clarify unclear details, rather than to seek validation of later interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability concerns the extent to which the findings may be applied to other contexts or different participants (Cohen et al., 2007). While qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalisation, transferability in the current study was supported through detailed descriptions of the research context, participant recruitment, sampling strategy, the pilot study, interview procedures, and the data treatment process. These detailed descriptions enable readers to assess the extent to which the findings may be relevant to other settings.

Dependability concerns the extent to which the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented over time, rather than whether identical findings could be mechanically reproduced in a qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, dependability was supported through a transparent audit trail across the major stages of the research process, including recruitment, interviewing, transcription, translation decisions, coding development, and theme refinement. I documented changes to the interview questions following the pilot study, kept field notes and post-interview reflective notes, and maintained analytical memos throughout coding and theme development. These records captured coding decisions, revisions to code labels and descriptions, uncertainties encountered during analysis, and the reasoning behind theme refinement. I also revisited earlier transcripts and coded extracts in the later stages of analysis to ensure that developing interpretations remained coherent across the dataset and grounded in participants' accounts. As the study adopted a reflexive thematic approach and all coding and interpretation were conducted by me, no formal inter-coder agreement exercise was undertaken. This is consistent with the analytic logic of the study, although it also places greater

importance on transparent documentation, reflexive memo-writing, and an auditable account of analytic decision making. To address this, I prioritised detailed procedural documentation and reflexive memo-writing to maintain an auditable account of the analytic process while preserving participant confidentiality.

Confirmability involves whether the researcher's biases, personal experiences, interests, or opinions have influenced the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, confirmability was strengthened through reflexive practices and systematic documentation. I maintained field notes and reflexive memos during data collection and analysis to record my assumptions, analytical decisions, and emerging interpretations, and I revisited notes when refining themes. In addition, the use of verbatim transcripts and the inclusion of translated quotations in the thesis support transparency by allowing readers to see the connection between the data and analytical claims. Given the bilingual nature of the study, translation choices for culturally specific terms were documented where relevant in order to preserve meaning and make interpretative decisions explicit.

Ensuring trustworthiness is closely linked to the ethical conduct of the study. Many of the procedures used to enhance credibility, dependability, and confirmability – such as transcript review for accuracy, maintaining an audit trail, and securing participant confidentiality – were also integral to meeting the ethical standards required for research involving human participants.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

When conducting research involving people, ethical principles that protect participants' rights, dignity, and well-being are as crucial as obtaining valid and reliable data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Lancaster University has its own ethical policies and procedures, and postgraduate researchers must document their awareness and consideration of ethical issues related to their projects. After following these guidelines, this project's ethical report (see Appendix) was

submitted to Lancaster University's ethics board, and approval to proceed was granted.

All participants received a detailed information sheet (see Appendix One) outlining the research aims, procedures, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. The consent form covered audio recording of the interview and that the audio data would be destroyed upon completion of the project. It also explained that the transcribed text data would be anonymised and securely stored on my password-protected personal laptop, and that the results would be shared publicly through presentations and publications, with all identifiable information removed and pseudonyms used in all reporting. The participants agreed to these conditions and voluntarily participated in the interviews, which was confirmed by their reading, digitally signing, and returning the consent forms (see Appendix).

Given the bilingual context of this research, the information sheet and consent form were provided in English as part of the formal project documentation. This decision also reflected the generally high English proficiency of students at the selected university and the conceptual complexity of the key term engagement, which has no direct and unambiguous equivalent in Chinese. To ensure that participants fully understood the study and the conditions of participation, I explained the background and purpose of the research orally in Chinese before each interview began, summarised the key points of the information sheet and consent form in Chinese, and invited participants to ask questions before giving consent. The pilot study also confirmed that participants were able to understand the materials. In this way, formal documentation was retained in English, while understanding and informed consent were additionally supported through oral clarification in participants' first language.

An additional ethical consideration emerged because some participants knew each other and were enrolled in the same programme. To minimise the potential influence of these relationships on participants' willingness to speak freely, interviews were conducted one-on-one, and interviews with participants from the same department were spaced apart in time. All participants were reassured that

their individual responses would not be shared with others. By integrating these measures, I ensured that participants' rights, understanding, privacy, and well-being were safeguarded throughout the research process.

4.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological foundations and research design of the study. It has explained the philosophical worldview underpinning the research, justified the use of a qualitative hermeneutic-phenomenological orientation and semi-structured interviews, and detailed the sampling, pilot study, data collection, and data analysis procedures. It has also addressed issues of qualitative rigour and ethical conduct. The next two chapters present the findings of the study, with Chapter 5 offering an overview of the ecology of student engagement and Chapter 6 analysing the conditions through which engagement is shaped in relational and context-dependent ways.

Chapter 5: The Ecology of Engagement: Findings for Research Question 1

5.1 Overview

This chapter presents the findings for Research Question 1 by examining how participants described their engagement in everyday university life. In addressing this question, the chapter is organised primarily around who students engaged with. Within each category of actor or relation, the analysis then considers where engagement was organised and what forms it took in practice. This structure reflects participants' accounts, in which engagement was often described first in relation to particular people, roles, or relational ties, while its settings and forms became clearer through those relationships.

For analytic clarity, the chapter is organised into four sections. Section 5.2 examines engagement with academic actors, including compulsory-course teachers, elective-course teachers, academic mentors, and dissertation supervisors. Section 5.3 turns to institutional and organisational actors, whose importance lay less in formal teaching than in the organisation of student life, administration, and evaluation. Section 5.4 explores engagement with peers as layered and shifting relations, showing that peer engagement was not limited to fixed social categories but moved across everyday co-presence, task-based cooperation, selective emotional support, and continuity beyond campus. Section 5.5 examines forms of engagement that were not organised mainly through the more structured interpersonal relations discussed earlier, including solitary and self-directed engagement, engagement with online resources, and engagement with AI. Taken together, the chapter maps the everyday ecology of engagement described by participants and shows that engagement was diverse, situational, and organised across both human and non-human relations in campus life.

5.2 Engagement with Academic Actors

In participants' accounts, a large proportion of their time and energy was directed towards activities and relationships associated with academic actors. Across the

interviews, four academic actors emerged as especially central in everyday campus life: compulsory-course teachers, elective-course teachers, academic mentors, and dissertation supervisors. These actors are discussed separately because participants described engaging with them in different ways and in different settings. Compulsory-course teachers are presented first and in greatest detail because they occupied the most central place in participants' everyday study, and because several day-to-day engagement practices and forms of online platforms use were described most clearly in relation to them and reappeared later in relation to other actors.

5.2.1 Compulsory-Course Teachers

Compulsory-course teachers were regarded as central figures in participants' everyday study because they were closely associated with credits, assessment, and course completion. At the same time, participants also described them as interactionally distant. Engagement with compulsory-course teachers was therefore not mainly framed as a close pedagogical relationship. Instead, it was described through situated ways of managing learning, information, attention, and social risk within a high-workload and strongly assessment-oriented environment.

Where this engagement took place mattered. Participants repeatedly linked what they did with compulsory-course teachers to particular settings, including large lecture halls, smaller major classes in later years, digital platforms used for announcements and submissions, and brief face-to-face moments immediately after class. In participants' accounts, these settings were associated with different forms of engagement and different levels of interaction.

For clarity, engagement with compulsory-course teachers is divided here into in-class and after-class contexts. In class, participants described several ways of "being there", ranging from visible participation, to silent attentive listening, to polite non-listening, and to performative group-work presentations. After class, engagement was usually thin and task-focused, taking place mainly through online channels, such as learning platforms and course group chats, and less

often through brief offline encounters, such as quick questions after class or formal consultation hours.

In-class engagement: four ways of “being there”

Most compulsory teaching was lecture-based and teacher-led. Teachers usually delivered content from the front of the room, and only a minority of participants reported regular questioning or discussion during class. In participants' accounts, engagement in compulsory classes was therefore not a single behaviour but a set of different ways of being present. Four recurring patterns were identified in the data.

A. Visible engagement

Visible engagement with compulsory-course teachers was relatively rare and highly situational. Only a small number of participants described themselves as “active” in class, and even these students stressed that they did not behave this way in every compulsory course. Speaking up, maintaining eye contact, and making oneself publicly visible in class were described as requiring extra energy and carrying a degree of social risk. Participants therefore presented visible participation as a selective and strategic practice, used when it felt worth the effort and exposure. Across the interviews, visible engagement appeared most clearly in two situations: front-row participation in large lectures, and more active participation in smaller major courses in later years.

First, in large compulsory lectures (usually 70-300 students), visible engagement was concentrated in the front rows rather than spread across the room. A small number of participants deliberately chose front seats and made themselves available for interaction by looking at the teacher, responding to questions, and occasionally initiating brief exchanges. One recurring pattern was strategic front-row visibility for learning efficiency and possible assessment advantage, often supported by the presence of *dazi* (搭子). In contemporary Chinese student usage, *dazi* refers to a task-specific companion, such as a study partner or group-work partner, rather than a close emotional friend, and the relationship mainly

centres on doing or finishing things together. P4 described sitting in the front row with two learning *dazi* as a way of following difficult content while also becoming recognisable to the teacher in an assessment system where marks mattered:

“In large lectures, it often feels like the teacher and the few of us in the front row who are really communicating. The teacher asks, ‘Do you understand?’ and we say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ and sometimes ask questions... The three of us always sit in the front row. After the whole semester like that, I know the teacher remembers us, and we hope teachers will be a bit kinder when giving marks.”

P4 also emphasised that he used this strategy mainly in courses he regarded as difficult, high-credit, and important. He was aware that the students in the front row could be seen as “showing off”, but sitting with *dazi* reduced the social risk and made the visible position feel safer and more comfortable.

A second pattern framed front-row engagement as a continuation of earlier classroom learning habits. Some participants described sitting in the front rows, taking notes, and maintaining visibility as an effective way of protecting concentration and making full use of class time. P39 explicitly linked her university study behaviour to her experience of large teacher-led classes at high school:

“I behaved the same way at university...I prefer seats in the front rows near the teacher and blackboard, staying active, and taking notes...it helped me to focus on learning rather than playing on my phone...because the teacher can see my desk and what I am doing...Although some teachers teach well and some don’t, but I always try to listen because I don’t want to spend too much time learning again after class.”

Here, visible engagement was described less as displaying activeness than as a way of sustaining attention, improving learning quality, and reducing the need to relearn the material later.

A third pattern linked visible engagement to particular teachers whose teaching was experienced as worthwhile or deserving respect. For example, P26 described being more willing to answer questions when a teacher connected course content with current social issues and made the class “interesting and lively”. P40 described sitting in the front row for an elderly professor who still wrote everything carefully on the blackboard with chalk:

“You don’t see teachers like him anymore; most teachers just use PowerPoint, and the same PPTs obviously haven’t changed for many years...not updated and boring.”

For him, sitting in the front row not only helped him follow the teacher’s explanation more easily, but also expressed personal respect for the teacher.

Taken together, visible engagement in large lectures was not driven by one single motive. It depended on where students placed themselves, whether they could afford the energy and exposure, and how they evaluated the course and teacher. Front-row visibility was described as a selective form of engagement associated with effective learning in difficult and important courses, protecting attention, gaining recognition in assessment, responding positively to teaching that participants valued, and often made easier by having *dazi* to mitigate the social cost of being conspicuous.

Visible engagement also appeared in later-year small classes within participants’ majors. By the second year, and especially by the third year, participants were taking more specialist courses in smaller groups, often ranging from 20 to 60 students. Compared with large lectures, the smaller size and reduced anonymity made engagement with teachers easier. As P11 explained:

“I feel more courageous and less pressure to answer questions because she recognised more faces in the room, and I would never do it in the large lecture hall with a sea of strangers.”

Participants also linked visible engagement in these later-year small classes to changes in teaching style and course structure. They described major courses

as more difficult, and noted that teachers were more likely to pause, ask questions, and invite short discussions. As P18 commented:

“In the third year, the classes became smaller, and interaction with teachers increased...I think... because it was easier for them to pay attention to everyone...I also noticed that third-year teachers were more likely to ask questions and have discussions to liven up the classroom atmosphere.”

As students progressed, visible engagement in later-year small classes was also linked to a more experienced assessment of teacher quality and course value. Some participants (P4, P7 and P36) described being increasingly able to distinguish between teachers who were seen as simply doing the minimum to complete their teaching duty and those who were seen as sincere, prepared, and respectful of students' time. As P7 put it:

“Students are not stupid. If we can really learn something from the class and the teacher, why not listen and talk to them more? Who wants to find the course and materials online and study again if teachers teach well in class?”

In some cases, visible engagement in later year smaller classes was also connected to assessment and future opportunities. Some participants noted that in smaller classes, teachers were more likely to recognise who spoke regularly and appeared engaged, which could matter for continuous assessment or later opportunities. P36, for instance, explained:

“I know that teacher, he is a professor with a big name... I want him to remember me because I am planning to do a master's degree and want to be supervised by him. So, I am eager to be an active student in the class, I want him to remember me and accept me later.”

At the same time, even in smaller later-year classes, visible engagement remained concentrated among a minority of students. Others chose not to speak because they believed they could still achieve good exam results without

classroom participation marks, and they described more active classmates as providing the classroom with the necessary “voices” from students in the classroom. As P39 put it when describing the small classes:

“Even though we are in the small size class for third year compulsory courses, it is always the students in the front who talk to teachers and are likely to answer questions. I am like most students... I don’t want to talk, and I am confident I can get a good exam score even with fewer bonus points for classroom participation...I am not judging them...classroom needs students like them and teachers need them to make some ‘sounds’ from students in the class...I respect them, but I was never one of them, and I don’t want to be one of them.”

Overall, visible engagement in compulsory courses was a selective rather than routine practice used by a minority of participants. It was closely tied to where students chose to sit in the classroom, their assessment of course value and teaching quality, the importance of assessment and future opportunities, the social and emotional cost of speaking up, and the energy students felt able to invest. Participants did not describe visible engagement as a fixed personal trait. Instead, they moved in and out of it across different courses and situations.

B. Silent but attentive engagement

Silent but attentive engagement emerged as the most common everyday mode in compulsory classes. Many participants described sitting in the middle or back rows, listening carefully, taking notes, and trying to keep up without speaking or initiating interaction. They did not treat silence as a lack of engagement. Instead, they described quiet listening as a practical way of studying when certain conditions were met. These conditions included the course being important or difficult, not a *shuikē* (水课, a slang for a low-value course taken mainly for credits); the teaching being clear enough to follow; and students having enough energy to concentrate within long and task-heavy days.

First, participants described silent but attentive listening as a way of managing time and energy under heavy workloads. Most said they were already exhausted and did not have the energy to both listen carefully and participate verbally, so they prioritised following the lecture and understanding the key points. As P23 explained:

“I just feel exhausted every day... when I attend difficult and important lectures, listening carefully is the most that I can do... only listening carefully is already tiring because my energy is not enough for the university’s endless tasks and requirements... so I tried my best to listen so I can digest the knowledge in the class and save energy for other tasks.”

Where teaching was clear enough, listening in class was also described as efficient because it reduced the need to relearn later. P9 said:

“As long as it’s not a *shuik* just for earning credits, I basically listen to all the other compulsory courses, because I always feel that if I have to study it all over again after class, it’s a huge waste of time, so I try my best to understand it during the class.”

Second, many participants described silent listening and note-taking as the normal and familiar way of being a student in class. For them, this was not a new choice made at university, but a continuation of earlier classroom habits formed through years of teacher-led lessons with limited interaction. Even participants (for example, P4) who sometimes engaged visibly described silent, note-taking listening as their default mode, to which they returned in most compulsory courses.

Third, some participants linked silence to course structure and knowledge density. In content-heavy modules, such as advanced mathematics, engagement was described less as speaking or discussing and more as following the logic of the teacher’s explanation. As P5 put it:

“In class... It’s mainly the teacher talking, there isn’t much interaction... for courses like advanced mathematics, you don’t really need much

interaction, I mean...I need to listen carefully to follow the teacher's flow and digest the knowledge."

Fourth, some participants described silence as a way of protecting concentration and managing emotion. Speaking in class was seen as emotionally demanding. They worried that trying to ask or answer questions would create anxiety, interrupt their attention, and require time to recover afterwards. In this sense, silence was described as a deliberate way to protect a steady listening state. P19 explained that if she forced herself to ask or answer questions in class, she would become very nervous while preparing to speak and then need time to calm down afterwards. In her words, it was better "to stay quiet and keep listening steadily" than to let her attention be broken by the emotional effort of public speaking.

Finally, silent engagement was shaped by social responsibility and peer norms. Participants worried not only about embarrassment, but also about interrupting and holding up the class and wasting other people's time. P14 said:

"I never tell the teachers I haven't understood, because I'm afraid my personal problem will hold up everyone else...I believe all Chinese students had heard the teacher say, 'If you waste one minute in class, it costs us about an hour when we have sixty students.' We all know this statement makes no logical sense, and I disagree with this calculation. But I do fear that asking questions or giving lengthy answers might waste the teacher's and classmates' time.... It's very awkward to speak in class."

Others avoided visible engagement, such as answering even when they knew the answer, because they did not want to be labelled as overly active, overly noticeable, or as showing off. As P28 put it, such behaviour could even appear "a bit self-centred and selfish", rather than being engaged. For these participants, staying silent was a way of balancing their own learning needs with care for the group and the risk of social judgement.

Importantly, participants did not describe silent but attentive engagement as limited to one type of classroom. It appeared in both large lectures and smaller later-year classes when students felt that the conditions were suitable. Some

noted that smaller classes made off-task behaviour more visible, which created more pressure to listen, while large lectures could feel more anonymous and freer.

Overall, silent but attentive engagement was presented as an active attempt to sustain attention under specific conditions, rather than as a passive absence of participation. At the same time, participants emphasised its fragility: it depended on teaching being clear enough to follow and on students having enough energy left to concentrate. When teaching felt unclear, repetitive, hard to engage with, or when classes came at the end of an exhausting day, attentive listening often slipped into strategic non-listening, as discussed in the next subsection.

C. Polite non-listening

Alongside visible engagement and silent but attentive engagement, a third recurring pattern was being physically present in compulsory classes while withdrawing attention from the teacher. Participants still attended because of attendance requirements, the sign-in system, and sometimes extra marks for participation in the class, but they described deliberately redirecting their attention to other activities. They did not present this as random misbehaviour. Instead, they described it as a strategic response to compulsory attendance in classes they judge to be of low quality or low value, while also managing limited time and energy.

One common reason participants gave for not listening was negative experiences of teaching. More than half of the participants described compulsory courses in which teachers simply read slides, spoke too quickly and unclearly to follow, or delivered content in ways that made understanding difficult even when students tried to pay attention. A small number also recalled more openly negative experiences, especially teachers who used class time to display personal status or criticise students. As P 19 said:

“In some courses, like one male teacher, he always talks about how great his experience is and how successful and powerful he is, and keeps saying how stupid and lazy we are, and that our generation knows nothing... He even blames us for not looking up at him or at the blackboard.

I mean, when he says such bad and arrogant things, who will be happy? No one likes him. We even feel he seems a bit drunk sometimes, and he gives every student a low grade... Seriously, the average score for that course in our class is very, very low. We even suspect it's his revenge for our quietness and ignoring him."

In such cases, not listening was described as a way of withdrawing from teaching that participants felt was unproductive or even humiliating, while still meeting the formal requirement to be present.

A second reason was the need to reallocate scarce time and energy under heavy workloads and dense timetables. Participants repeatedly described long days filled with classes and activities, movement across a large campus, assignments, group work, and preparation for competitions or exams. Under these conditions, some participants chose to use part of the in-class time for other tasks or for rest, especially when a compulsory lecture was scheduled in the evening or when it was seen as a *shuike* with little perceived value. Like P9 explained:

"Most days I have classes from morning... 8 am... until night like 9 pm or 10 pm, and the campus is huge. If a compulsory lecture in the evening is just the teacher repeating the textbook, especially some *shuike*, my brain is already dead... I still go to class to sign in, but I use that time to finish other homework or prepare for competitions. If I force myself to listen, I feel I waste my limited energy on something meaningless."

Many others described using these classes to reply to messages, plan their schedule, do work for other courses, or simply switch off mentally for a while. In their accounts, not listening was not simply a matter of "giving up", but of deciding where attention and effort were best spent.

A third feature of this pattern was that participants often tried to practise non-listening in a quiet and restrained way in the classroom. Even when they were not paying attention to the teacher, they often tried not to disturb the class. They described choosing seats at the back or sides of the room, typing quietly on laptops, using earphones discreetly at low volume, or doing written homework

without talking. P37 described this as “polite non-listening”: by turning up, he felt he was still “giving the teacher face” and “meeting the sign-in requirement”, while managing his attention in ways that minimised disruption to others.

Digital devices played an important role in making this ‘double presence’ possible. Smartphones, tablets and laptops allowed students to combine physical attendance with other activities, such as revising for different courses, working on group work documents, chatting with friends, reading the news or novels, or even watching alternative online lectures. P35 recalled:

“In one compulsory course, I often have a split screen on my laptop. One side is the PPT for that class, in case the teacher asks questions. On the other side, I used to watch another teacher’s video on the same topic from Bilibili (a Chinese version of YouTube) or do whatever I want to do.”

Participants were aware of the risks and ambivalence of this pattern. Some worried that not listening might mean missing subtle hints about exams and assignments. Others felt guilty about not paying attention but still chose not to listen in particular courses they saw as “beyond saving”, usually because the teaching was poor and the course was seen as boring or not worth the effort. As P38 put it:

“Sometimes I feel bad for the teacher, but I also feel I have no choice. If I listen to every boring and useless class, I will collapse.”

In this sense, being physically present but mentally elsewhere was described as an uneasy but practical response to the gap between compulsory attendance and students’ own judgement about where their time, energy, and attention were best invested.

D. Performative engagement in group-work presentations

Most compulsory courses required at least one group assignment each semester, and usually ended with an in-class presentation. In this subsection, the focus is

not on group dynamics in general, but on how group presentations structured engagement with teachers in class.

For most participants, group presentations were experienced less as opportunities for meaningful exchange and more as formal requirements for showing that a task had been completed. A common routine was described across the interview: groups presented one after another; classmates paid only loose attention; questions were rare; and teachers provided brief comments and a mark before moving on. In this form, engagement was directed more towards assessment and task completion than towards discussion or learning. As P3 put it:

“I really think in-class group presentations waste time. It feels like the teacher just needs ‘group work’ as a teaching activity in their course design. We present, but the teacher usually just listens until we finish and then gives a score. There’s hardly any discussion about what each group presented.”

Several participants also suggested that teachers themselves treated presentation sessions as something to get through. Their feedback was usually brief and focused more on scoring than on sustained engagement with the content. Some participants described these sessions as mutually perfunctory: students presented because marks were attached, while teachers watched and evaluated without much follow-up.

Time pressure in class further reinforced this pattern. With fixed teaching schedules and many groups to accommodate, presentation sessions were often described as rushed and compressed. Groups moved quickly through their slides, teachers moved quickly to the next group, and there was little room for extended questions, discussion, or deeper guidance. Under these conditions, presentations functioned less as opportunities for dialogue and more as staged checkpoints confirming that the task had been done.

At the same time, a minority of participants pointed to some benefits of these presentations. A few described them as one of the few structured opportunities

to speak in front of a large group during university studies. They felt that repeatedly having to present helped them to overcome shyness, practise oral expression and gain a sense of achievement when a presentation went well. P19 commented that although she disliked the “formalism” of the tasks, standing at the front still “forced me to organise my ideas and say them out loud”, which she saw as useful preparation for future interviews or public speaking, so she was eager to be the presenter in the group work. In this way, even within what most participants described as a highly formal and performative practice, some were able to use it as an opportunity to build confidence and practise presentation skills.

Overall, participants described group-work presentations in compulsory courses mainly as performative engagement directed towards assessment and formal requirements rather than towards deep interaction with teachers and peers. For a smaller number of participants, however, the same structures also provided a basic opportunity to build confidence and practise speaking in front of others, even though it remained embedded in a largely formalistic mode of engagement.

After-class engagement: thin, instrumental, and uneven

After class, engagement with compulsory-course teachers was generally thin, instrumental, and uneven. It rarely took the form of extended pedagogical dialogue. Instead, participants described after-class engagement mainly as information work, such as checking announcements, accessing materials, and submitting assignments, and as problem-fixing, such as resolving a specific question as quickly and with as little effort as possible. This engagement took place mainly through several digital platforms and, less often, through brief offline contact points.

A. Online engagement

Online engagement mainly took place through three channels: (1) the university learning management system, referred to here as X-Moodle for anonymisation; (2) course-based QQ or WeChat groups (widely used Chinese instant-messaging

and social media applications); and (3) more occasional one-to-one contact via private message or email.

X-Moodle functioned as a resource and submission hub, but its use was inconsistent across courses and teachers. It was primarily used as a space to watch recorded lectures when these were available, download learning materials uploaded by teachers, including slides used in class, and submit assignments. Participants described uneven use across courses. Some teachers used it heavily, while others used it minimally or never used it. Some participants such as P22 appreciated the flexibility it offered, especially when teachers uploaded their own recordings for difficult compulsory courses. Being able to pause, replay, and search for unfamiliar concepts or knowledge “at my own pace” was seen as helpful for understanding and for fitting study around crowded timetables. In these accounts, recorded lectures became a meaningful form of after-class engagement with teachers’ explanations, even though the interaction remained one-way.

Others were much more critical of the platform itself. Many participants described it as “complicated” and “not user-friendly”, and some participants, such as P8 and P12, even suggested that it was “copied from foreign universities without being properly adapted to our needs”. They complained that the system was slow or crashed, especially close to deadlines, and that different teachers used it in inconsistent ways. These frustrations made some students reluctant to rely on X-Moodle and reinforced the sense that official online spaces were designed more for content access and submission than for conversation.

QQ and WeChat course groups were described as high-frequency but low-interaction spaces. Their main function was one-way broadcasting: teachers posted notices about deadlines, classrooms, materials, sign-ins, and occasionally responded to leave requests. Students often kept these groups quiet so that key announcements would not be buried. When the groups became “lively,” it was usually around assessment moments rather than learning dialogue, especially when a few students asked teachers what to focus on for the exam, and sometimes after exams when students appealed for lenient grading. In

participants' accounts, these course groups functioned more as announcement channels and occasional exam-related contact points than as spaces of sustained discussion.

Private messaging through QQ and WeChat, as well as email, were described as much rarer and more socially costly forms of engagement. Although many teachers said that students could add their QQ or WeChat accounts and contact them privately, most participants felt too embarrassed or hesitant to do so. For example, P1 worried about "bothering" teachers or "saying something inappropriate" and therefore chose not to add them at all. In this study, only four participants described privately messaging compulsory-course teachers to ask questions about difficult problems, unclear slides or assignment details. Those who did so found that teachers replied quickly and in detail, and they expressed appreciation for this, but they also recognised themselves as exceptions. Email played an even smaller role. As P1 and P4 said, they did not have a habit of using email and did not see it as a main communication channel in everyday university life. Across the interviews, only a handful of courses required students to submit assignments by email, and almost no participants reported using email to ask academic questions.

Overall, online after-class engagement was characterised by platform fragmentation and low reciprocity. Across these channels, participants did not describe sustained back-and-forth discussion. Instead, after-class online engagement worked as a system for receiving instructions, retrieving resources, and reducing uncertainty, with occasional brief questioning by a minority of students.

B. Offline engagement

Participants described two main forms of after-class face-to-face engagement: formal consultation hours and brief encounters immediately after class. Both were available in principle, but actual use was limited and shaped by power distance and, in some cases, gendered ideas of appropriate distance.

Formal consultation hours were described as more symbolic than routinely used. University regulations required teachers to offer fixed consultation hours for each course, especially before final exams. On paper, these office hours were meant to provide space and time for questions about course content or assignments. Some teachers announced times when they would be in a specific classroom for consultation, usually for around two hours per semester; others gave their office numbers and indicated when they were normally on campus. In practice, some participants reported going to these classrooms with peers as a group to ask questions, partly because being with others felt less intimidating. Very few participants, for example, P6, reported visiting the teachers' office directly.

Most participants described timetable clashes, long distances across a large campus, and the risk that "the teacher might not be there anyway" as reasons for not going. They also said that it could be difficult and time-consuming to find teachers' offices on campus, and that they were worried about interrupting teachers or felt nervous about entering a teacher's office alone, especially when they did not already know the teacher well. For some participants, including P5, P8 and P18, it was "easier to search online or ask friends than to make a special trip to see a teacher and ask questions". As a result, formal consultation hours existed more as a symbolic guarantee of access than as a regular part of engagement with compulsory-course teachers.

Much more common was what participants described as 'catch-the-teacher' immediately after class for quick questions, although still done by a minority of participants. In the short period between lessons, some students went to the front of the classroom to catch the teacher and ask one or two brief, targeted questions. These interactions were valued because they were short, convenient, and less intimidating than office visits. However, they remained highly instrumental, aimed at resolving a specific question rather than developing an ongoing conversation. Participants also described this approach as a way of avoiding the emotional labour of sending a private message and waiting for a reply.

A very small number of participants, such as P3, P9 and P11, also described walking and talking with teachers for a short distance after class when they

happened to be going the same way. These conversations were more likely with younger teachers and in later years, especially when students had become familiar with the teachers. This pattern was described as gendered by only a few participants. Some female students described walking and chatting with female teachers they liked, talking about course content, internships, or everyday worries, and described these teachers as “open”, “sincere” and “like an older sister”. At the same time, some participants emphasised that they would avoid walking alone with most male teachers, even when they respected them academically. They preferred to keep interactions with male teachers within the classroom or in very short, task-focused conversations. These accounts suggest that offline after-class engagement was shaped not only by time and opportunity but also by participants’ understandings of appropriate distance in teacher-student relations and by gendered concerns.

Overall, offline after-class engagement remained minimal and highly situational. Even when institutional structures existed, participants described after-class access as constrained by time, distance, and social norms. As a result, most after-class engagement stayed instrumental and brief, rather than developing into sustained pedagogical dialogue.

Taken together, these findings show that compulsory-course teachers were central to students’ academic trajectories but remained socially distant in everyday interaction. Engagement with them took multiple forms rather than one stable pattern. In class, students moved between visible participation, silent but attentive listening, polite non-listening, and performative presentation work, depending on course value, teaching quality, assessment stakes, and the time and energy they felt able to invest. After class, engagement was usually thin and instrumental. Online channels supported access and coordination more than dialogue, while offline contact was largely limited to brief opportunistic moments rather than regular consultation or sustained interaction.

5.2.2 Elective-Course Teachers

For most participants, elective courses were attended mainly for credits and timetable convenience rather than for learning itself. Engagement with elective-course teachers was shaped less by subject interest than by scheduling constraints, credit requirements, and students' rationing of energy. Most participants described attending electives mainly to sign in, secure required credits, and use the class period as a convenient block for self-study or recovery. Teachers were physically present, but they rarely became the main focus of students' attention.

A key condition shaping engagement with elective-course teachers was when these classes took place. Elective courses were often scheduled in the evening and sometimes at weekends. Here, "where" included not only the classroom itself but also the time slot in which the class took place. When electives followed a full day of compulsory modules and other tasks, participants often described this period as low-energy time. Electives were therefore positioned as secondary: students tended to reserve their best attention for compulsory, high-credit, or difficult courses and fitted electives into the remaining gaps. This was not framed simply as individual preference but as an institutional arrangement. One participant, P26, recalled asking a teacher why an elective was always scheduled in the evening; the teacher explained that he also taught compulsory modules, his weekday daytime timetable was already full, and scheduling practices prioritised compulsory courses and thus left electives to evenings or weekends. In this sense, electives appeared as secondary not only in students' priorities but also in the wider timetabling arrangement.

Within this arrangement, the dominant forms of engagement were administrative and self-directed rather than interactive. Attendance systems, such as sign-ins, participation marks, and routine checks, made physical presence necessary, but presence did not necessarily become listening or interaction. A common routine was that participants such as P5 and P20 described as "attendance for credit" and "polite self-study": students attended, stayed quiet, avoided disturbing others, and redirected their attention to other coursework, competition preparation, messages, or rest. This pattern was similar to the polite non-listening described in compulsory courses, although in electives it appeared more routinely and with

less tension. Teacher-student interaction was minimal. Asking questions in class was rare, and after-class contact was even thinner. Unlike compulsory-course teachers, elective-course teachers were seldom approached via private messages, office hours, or follow-up conversations. What remained was often one-way online communication, mainly through receiving announcements in course QQ or WeChat groups and checking uploaded materials when required. When participants commented on elective-course teachers' stance, they often suggested that many teachers also treated the course as something to complete, delivering required content and moving on with limited investment in discussion or feedback.

In terms of "with whom," engagement in electives was often neither strongly teacher-centred nor peer-centred. Teacher ties were weak because the course itself was framed as low-value and because students' attention was allocated elsewhere. Peer ties were also weak because many electives were cross-major and cross-year. Participants frequently entered classrooms surrounded by strangers, making it difficult to form stable discussion relationships or informal learning ties, especially in late or weekend sessions. In these accounts, the elective classroom functioned more as a space of co-presence than as a learning community.

As a result, group work and presentations in elective courses were also often described as perfunctory. As P2 put it, this was often a matter of "completing the task because the task exists." Preparation was seen as time-consuming relative to the credit value of the course, coordination across unfamiliar classmates was difficult, and in-class presentations were often experienced as going through the motions. Teacher feedback was described as limited and often functioned more as brief scoring than sustained engagement with ideas.

A small number of cases stood out as exceptions. For P23 and P40, electives were chosen for strong personal interest, such as astronomy and Euro-American literature. In these cases, engagement shifted mainly in attention and follow-up learning: students listened more carefully and sometimes extended learning beyond class through related videos or independent reading. Even in these cases,

however, direct interaction with teachers remained limited. What changed most was students' own investment rather than the depth of teacher–student dialogue.

Participants also pointed to an inequality within the elective system. A very small number of electives were widely known as genuinely engaging and practically relevant, but were difficult to enrol in because of limited places and high demand. This created a gap between the idea of electives as choice and the reality that access to highly valued electives could be scarce. Overall, participants described engagement with elective-course teachers as generally strategic and low-investment, shaped more by credits, scheduling, and energy management than by learning interest.

Taken together, these findings show that engagement with elective-course teachers was structured more by timetabling and credit requirements than by learning aims and interests. Evening and weekend scheduling shaped the energy students brought into the room; dominant practices were signing in, quiet self-study, and attendance with minimal engagement; and engagement ties remained thin because both teacher relationships and peer relationships were weak, especially in cross-major electives. Interest-based electives existed, but in this study they appeared as uncommon exceptions rather than the norm.

5.2.3 Academic Mentors

Academic mentors were described as a formal arrangement intended to support undergraduate learning, with each student allocated a mentor by the department or faculty. In practice, however, most participants reported only limited contact. A common pattern was that the mentor met students once offline, often in a brief one-to-one or small-group meeting, and left their WeChat or QQ contact and told students to get in touch if needed. However, many participants felt this was often a routine task for teachers and rarely led to any further contact. Students themselves were also hesitant to initiate communication. For many, such meetings took place once a year, sometimes twice. Engagement with academic mentors was therefore described less as an ongoing learning relationship and more as a light-touch system that became relevant mainly when a problem or

need arose. As P19 put it, “if there was no particular issue, there was little reason to seek contact”.

When engagement with academic mentors did become denser, participants described two different pathways. The first was supportive mentoring, in which the academic mentor acted as a reliable source of academic and personal guidance. P12, for example, described an academic mentor who was “very responsible”, helped with academic issues and personal difficulties at university, and offered emotional support when needed. At the same time, P12 made clear that this was not presented as a normal or guaranteed outcome of the mentoring system itself, but as something that depended heavily on the individual mentor’s willingness to invest time, energy, and care.

A second pattern was more intensive but was not experienced as supportive. Instead, it was described as extractive or pressurising. P18 described her academic mentor who drew undergraduates into research-related tasks and required her and other undergraduates with the same mentor to attend his weekly meetings with master’s and doctoral students. She explained:

“We were asked...even forced or threatened to search materials and write literature reviews apparently unrelated to us...but he said it is our honour to be guided by him for academic projects...I mean...he is not paid for us and never put our names in the project...But he said he is giving us academic guidance with real projects...but that was a lot of work for us...he gives us tasks every two weeks, and we need to reschedule our time to attend his group meetings.”

She (P18) also described these interactions as emotionally heavy and unsettling. In her account, the mentor repeatedly stressed students’ weaknesses and future employment pressure, which made the relationship feel stressful rather than supportive. This suggests that the same formal arrangement could be experienced very differently depending on how the role was enacted in practice. Even when participants doubted the value of the tasks, some still complied because they were concerned about possible later consequences. In P18’s case,

this included worry about being spoken of negatively or facing subtle disadvantages in later assessments, progression, or other academic processes. In this sense, engagement with academic mentors was normally described as cautious and strategic rather than active and willing.

Taken together, these accounts show that academic mentors were formally present but only lightly embedded in most participants' everyday study. For many participants, the relationship remained infrequent, need-based, and limited in depth. At the same time, participants' experiences varied sharply depending on the individual mentor. In some cases, the role was associated with practical guidance and emotional support; in others, it became a source of pressure, extra work, or strategic caution. What stood out in the data was not simply the formal existence of the mentoring system, but the uneven ways in which it was enacted and experienced in practice.

5.2.4 Dissertation Supervisors

Dissertation supervisors entered the picture later than academic mentors, usually in the third or fourth year, when students began dissertation work. Participants described this role as both highly consequential and unevenly accessible. P11 described how timing shaped access: delaying contact with preferred supervisors meant that popular supervisors were quickly fully allocated, leaving fewer choices later. In this sense, engagement with dissertation supervisors was shaped even before supervision formally began, through timing, allocation, and informal reputations.

Once allocated, engagement with dissertation supervisors was described as mainly online, often through text messages or voice notes, with occasional face-to-face meetings. Participants frequently emphasised that supervisors' limited availability and heavy workloads shaped both their expectations and experiences of the relationship. A common pattern was that the supervisor provided broad requirements, templates, and formal standards, after which students worked independently and returned with drafts for targeted feedback. In this structure, engagement was organised mainly through documents and online

communication rather than sustained dialogue. Students engaged primarily through selecting a topic, checking requirements, submitting drafts, receiving corrections, and revising their work.

Participants' evaluations of this role were mixed. Some accepted minimal contact as normal, especially when they received clear guidance on format and expectations. Others experienced the relationship as distant, with feedback focused on compliance and completion rather than intellectual development. Because the dissertation was tied closely to progression and graduation, students often approached supervisors cautiously because they knew that misunderstanding requirements, missing deadlines, or creating a negative impression could affect their dissertation progress and outcomes.

Taken together, dissertation supervision was described as a structured, high-consequence relationship that emerged late in the degree and was mediated heavily by online communication and written drafts. Compared with academic mentors, the dissertation supervisor role was more clearly tied to an assessed product and therefore carried a stronger sense of gatekeeping. At the same time, the depth of pedagogical interaction still depended on the individual supervisor's willingness and capacity to engage.

5.3 Engagement with Institutional and Organisational Actors

Alongside compulsory-course and elective-course teachers, participants described engagement with a range of institutional and organisational actors whose roles extended beyond timetabled teaching and were more closely tied to the organisation of student life and progression. Engagement with these actors was typically episodic and task-based. Participants often described a default position of no need, no contact, with interaction becoming denser mainly when a task, an evaluation, or a problem required action. Their accounts suggest that engagement was shaped by awareness of these actors' authority and possible consequences, and was often mediated through official channels such as online chat groups, forms, and student intermediaries. The main exception was the

dormitory porters, who appeared as a frequent point of everyday contact and care.

5.3.1 Banzhuren

Participants described limited contact and engagement with the *banzhuren*. The *banzhuren* is a distinctive role in the Chinese higher education system. The term comes from Chinese pinyin: *ban* means “class”, and *zhuren* can be translated as “director”. However, the role does not correspond directly to a “class director” in English-speaking contexts. The *banzhuren* typically undertakes a wide range of overlapping duties, including everyday student management, communication with parents, student welfare, and political and ideological work. Day-to-day governance of the class is mediated through student leaders, such as the class monitor, who formed an intermediary layer between the *banzhuren* and students. Engagement with the *banzhuren* was mainly organised through occasional class meetings and short-notice mobilisation.

When class meetings took place, they were typically described as teacher-led and one-way: students gathered, listened, and left, with limited space for questions or discussion. The content of these meetings was framed mainly as governance rather than academic guidance. Participants mentioned reminders and checks around safety and conduct, discipline and collective norms, moral and political education, and repeated exhortation to study hard within a competitive environment. Most participants evaluated these meetings negatively, describing them as time-consuming and emotionally uncomfortable. P2 described a common pattern in which the *banzhuren* began with lengthy self-promotional talk and then shifted to standard messages about effort, participation, and assessment pressure:

“Our *banzhuren* showing off his personal background and experience, and then...achievements...this part normally lasts about 40 minutes to an hour. Then moved into a standard message about studying hard, participating in activities, and paying attention to assessment and rankings.”

Most participants described these meetings as “formalistic”. More than half of the participants emphasised that some *banzhuren* actively intensified peer comparison by foregrounding rankings, scholarships, and progression opportunities, which increased stress rather than providing support.

Only a small number of participants offered a different picture of the *banzhuren*. P11 described her *banzhuren*, who acknowledged the importance of rankings but tried to channel competition into resource sharing and more supportive peer relations:

“We all know competition and ranking matters important, but our class is different from others as I know...We did have an extremely competitive atmosphere and everyone study hard, but...our *banzhuren* made it...healthier than others...She encouraged us to share learning materials in class WeChat group... And our relationships are good, although competition exists...but we don’t have ‘dirty’ competition behaviours like some other classes have...they hide knowledge materials and resources... and mutual suspicion between students. We are all studying hard, competition is still there, but we are all improving, our class GPA and so on are better than those of other classes.”

P9 also described warmth and care in a more socially oriented class meeting style, where *banzhuren* used festivals as opportunities to create a relaxed atmosphere and informal conversation:

“I feel our *banzhuren* is extremely good, and she always combines the meeting with some festivals... buys snacks and drinks...we talked about study, news, and watched films together...she is cool.”

Beyond class meetings, the *banzhuren* also appeared through short-notice mobilisation. Most participants described being told, sometimes with little time’s warning, to attend lectures or events to “make up numbers”. Notices were circulated either directly in the class QQ or WeChat group chat or via the class monitor and other student leaders. Participants often felt that most activities were irrelevant to them, and that they could rarely learn anything, but wasted their time

and made them busy and tired. As P36 described, “we were just numbers there, to make the event look popular”. Attendance was linked to routine evaluations or class conduct records, and most participants described this as something they were expected to do rather than something they genuinely chose to, especially when names were checked or when participation was framed as something that could affect later assessment.

Taken together, these accounts show that face-to-face contact with *banzhuren* was relatively limited, but students’ direct and indirect engagement with this role remained frequent through online notices, required replies, form-filling, and other official tasks. Even when class committee members acted as intermediaries, participants still felt that *banzhuren* remained closely involved in class management, routine administration, and other official tasks. This meant that engagement with *banzhuren* was mainly official and task-oriented rather than personal. At the same time, participants paid close attention to this role because the *banzhuren* was seen as having considerable influence over assessment, regulation, awards, and future opportunities.

5.3.2 Residential College Counsellors

Participants positioned residential college counsellors as the main staff presence within the college system and as closer to students’ everyday life than the *banzhuren*. At X University, these counsellors were often younger staff members assigned to residential duties and were expected to live in the residential college or rotate through on-site duty. This meant that the role was more closely associated with residential college life than with the academic department.

Most engagement with residential college counsellors was low-frequency and need-based. Many participants described a default pattern of little contact unless something had to be handled, such as a formality to complete, a notice to follow, or a practical difficulty that required staff involvement. When college counsellors convened meetings, participants often described a predictable format: students were gathered as a cohort, information was delivered from the front, and the session ended with limited interaction. Several participants, such as P28 and P32,

characterised these meetings as “procedural and low in information, with familiar motivational language about studying hard and maintaining a positive attitude”. In these cases, engagement was largely receptive. Students attended, listened, and left, with the meeting functioning more as an institutional routine than as a space for dialogue.

At the same time, participants also described residential college counsellors as important organisers of college-based activities. These included volunteering, social practice, physical exercise requirements, and other extracurricular or co-curricular activities organised through the college system. In participants’ accounts, many of these activities were not important because of direct academic value, but because they were connected to the wider evaluative system of the university, especially comprehensive evaluation and other recognised records of participation. In this sense, the residential college system was concerned not only with welfare and daily management, but also with organising forms of participation that could later matter in evaluation and selection.

Participants described being notified to attend these activities, sometimes with short notice, mainly through WeChat groups. Much of this work was also supported by student intermediaries within the college system, who helped circulate notices, collect responses, and assist with attendance checks or registration. Attendance could be framed as voluntary, but participants also described implicit and explicit forms of pressure. In these accounts, such activities were often experienced less as academic or social opportunities than as institutional requirements to be completed, especially when they were linked to comprehensive evaluation or other forms of recognised participation.

Despite these formal and task-led patterns, a different strand of accounts emphasised warmth, responsiveness, and practical help. Some participants described residential college counsellors as careful, gentle, and effective at handling matters, especially when students approached them for support. For example, P24 described:

“When I was badly ill at midnight, my roommate called the residential college counsellor, and she came within...like fifteen minutes, and took me to the hospital. She stayed with me there all night and then called my parents early in the morning... I was really...super... moved.”

In these accounts, counsellors were seen as approachable because the interaction did not carry the same academic consequences as teacher assessment. When students needed help, they described counsellors as willing to respond and assist, with few perceived conflicts of interest. This meant that the same institutional role could be experienced either as a procedural organiser of meetings and activities or as a reliable source of everyday support, depending on how the staff member enacted the role and how often a student needed to draw on that support. Overall, participants described residential college counsellors as combining everyday management, activity organisation, and practical support. Although direct contact was often limited and need-based, these counsellors remained present through meetings, WeChat notices, organised activities, and the wider residential college system.

5.3.3 Dormitory Porters

If residential college counsellors appeared mainly at moments of administrative contact, dormitory porters were present through repetition and proximity. At the research site, all dormitory porters referred to by participants were middle-aged women. Participants encountered them at the entrance to the dormitory building, through routine access control, and through the basic infrastructure of residential life. Porters were associated with rules around entry and exit, evening access, and checks linked to safety and the management of shared living space, including hygiene routines and electricity safety. This made them part of the everyday regulation of student life, even though they were rarely named in formal discussions of engagement.

Unlike most other institutional roles, participants described dormitory porters as a consistent source of daily care. Many referred to the porter as a warm and friendly presence, often using familial language, and highlighted small acts that

accumulated into a sense of being looked after. Examples included reminders posted in dormitory group chats about rain or sudden drops in temperature, and a patient response when students returned late and needed the door to be opened. Even when porters were implementing institutional rules, participants emphasised tone and attitude. Many participants described porters as enforcing boundaries while still treating students kindly, which softened the experience of regulation and made the dormitory feel more humane.

A small number of participants, such as P16 and P21, also extended their attention to the porters' working conditions. They noticed that the porter's space could be physically uncomfortable, for example because of poor insulation or an overly small booth, and interpreted this as a sign that the university did not properly respect this labour. As P16 said:

“Every day I met the porter (aunt), I had complicated feelings... they always gave me a warm and friendly smile and had small daily talks, but I felt sad and uncomfortable with her cold and small working space...I felt university leaders never respected and cared for them...but the aunt gave me so much warmth, just like my elderly aunt at home.”

This was a relatively minor strand in the data, but it is notable because it shows some students attending not only to the rules porters enforced, but also the conditions under which porters themselves worked.

Taken together, these accounts show that dormitory porters occupied a distinctive place in students' everyday engagement with the university. They were encountered through daily co-presence, routine gatekeeping, and the practical organisation of dormitory life, but were also the actor most consistently associated with everyday care. In participants' accounts, this role combined regulation with warmth, so that rules and checks were often experienced alongside small but repeated acts of kindness. This made dormitory porters an important part of how students experienced the university in residential space.

5.3.4 Class Committee Members as Student Intermediaries

Participants also described a set of class committee members, most commonly class monitors, Youth League secretaries (the student secretary of the Class Youth League branch), study committee members, and psychological committee members (a student role concerned with peer wellbeing and mental health-related activities). Although these actors were themselves students, they were often encountered less as ordinary peers than as student organisers who helped the staff manage day-to-day class business. In participants' accounts, their shared role was mainly to pass on notices, collect information, coordinate sign-ins, and help complete administrative or collective tasks assigned by the *banzhuren* or residential college counsellors. As P4 described:

“I do not have much contact with student committee members in my life. I feel they are more like a mouthpiece for the school or teachers. If something comes up, they notify us, or we send things to them when something needs to be submitted. That is basically all.”

For this reason, participants' engagement with class committee members was usually task-oriented. Most contact happened when something needed to be delivered, completed, or collected, such as registration for an activity, submitting information, signing in, or responding to a class requirement. Face-to-face contact was often limited. Most participants said that nearly all the interaction took place online through WeChat or QQ class groups, where notices, reminders, and requests were circulated.

At the same time, participants suggested that, beyond passing on information and collecting materials, whether class committee members took on a more active role depended largely on how the student occupying the role chose to enact it. Some were seen as more active and more willing to organise collective activities, while others focused only on the minimum work required. This difference appeared especially obvious in roles such as the psychological committee member, where routine administrative responsibilities were often lighter than those of the class monitor or Youth League secretary. In these cases, the role could remain almost invisible, or become more active in organising class activities, depending on the person who enacted it.

Still, most participants expressed appreciation for class committee members who handled routine tasks effectively. As P2 said, she was “grateful for those who helped the class complete procedural requirements related to attendance, activities, and other collective matters”. In participants’ accounts, class committee members were important intermediaries linking students with the *banzhuren* and departments.

However, participants did not always view these roles positively or neutrally. Most participants also suggested that class committee roles could create a sense of positional difference within the class, as these students often had closer and more regular contact with the *banzhuren* and teachers than others did. As P20 put it:

“I feel that class committee members, especially compared with most ordinary students who do not hold any class position, sometimes show a very natural sense of superiority when they communicate with us. You can feel that they think they have some authority. They show off a bit and act as if they are above others.”

Nearly a quarter of the participants also described a degree of suspicion or distrust. Class committee members were seen as having access to information earlier than others, or as knowing more than ordinary students did. This did not necessarily mean that participants openly accused them of unfair behaviour, but it could create a sense of distance, caution, or unease about how information was shared within the class. These comments did not dominate the data, but they suggest that participants often viewed class committee members in ambivalent ways: they could be seen as useful and important, but not always as neutral, approachable, or trustworthy.

Interview data also suggest that taking on such a role could itself be a strategic choice. As P2 said:

“When I was in my second year, I actively tried to become the class monitor. It was not really because I wanted to serve the class and my classmates. More importantly, being a class monitor could give me extra points in the

comprehensive evaluation, and I hoped to have more contact with teachers in the department, so that I might get more information and more opportunities in the future... Of course, I would still do my job properly...and at the end of the semester, my classmates would also score my performance.”

Taken together, these findings show that class committee members occupied an intermediate position in students’ everyday engagement ecology. They were students, but they were not encountered only as peers. Instead, they were mainly engaged with as organisers, relays, and coordinators of everyday class business. Their importance lay largely in their role in managing information, tasks, and collective requirements. At the same time, how this role was experienced depended heavily on the person occupying it, the wider class atmosphere, and the extent to which the role was enacted as routine administration, collective support, or personal advantage.

5.4 Engagement with Peers as Layered and Shifting Relations

Participants’ accounts of engagement with peers were more fluid and overlapping than their accounts of engagement with academic or institutional actors. The same person could be encountered in different ways across different situations, for example as a classmate, a roommate, a dazi, a project partner, or a friend. These relations were therefore not always experienced as fixed social categories. Instead, participants described peer engagement as layered and shifting, with different ties becoming more or less important depending on everyday co-presence, practical tasks, emotional needs, and the continuation of relationships beyond the campus.

At the same time, participants’ accounts suggest that many peer relations in university were organised around practical needs, task completion, and situation-specific forms of cooperation. In some cases, students formed temporary or repeated cooperative ties in order to complete particular tasks, including coursework, campus activities, paid class attendance, or paid running tasks. Some of these relations involved little prior familiarity and were based primarily

on exchange, convenience, or repeated cooperation rather than friendship. By contrast, emotionally oriented or genuinely like-minded friendships were mentioned less often. Participants did describe some close and supportive ties, but these were usually selective rather than widespread, and several suggested that finding close friends or romantic relationships was not a central expectation of university life.

For this reason, this section does not present peer engagement as a set of separate and stable actor categories. Instead, it is organised around four recurring ways in which peer relations appeared in participants' accounts: everyday co-present ties, task-based, project-based, and transactional ties, selective friendship and emotional support, and beyond-campus continuity.

5.4.1 Everyday Co-present ties

A first layer of peer engagement appeared through everyday co-present ties. In participants' accounts, these ties included classmates, students from the same major, roommates, neighbours in the dormitory, and other students whom they encountered repeatedly in the ordinary spaces and routines of campus life. These ties were formed through repeated co-presence in classrooms, dormitories, libraries, canteens, and other everyday settings. Through this repetition, they became part of the ordinary social environment in which students studied, lived, rested, and moved around campus.

Engagement within these ties was often low-intensity but frequent. Participants described greeting one another, sitting together in class, sharing everyday information, reminding each other about deadlines or sign-ins, asking about classrooms or assignments, and accompanying one another to routine activities such as classes, meals, or self-study. These were often the most immediately available peers in daily situations, and they were useful for small practical matters in study and campus life. Repeated presence itself mattered because it created familiarity, convenience, and a basic structure for everyday coordination.

Participants' accounts also show that everyday co-present ties varied greatly in closeness and intensity. P2, for example, said that she basically knew everyone in her own major, but was "not particularly close" to them. P4 similarly described being relatively familiar with the classmates who usually sat in the front rows, while contact with others remained limited. As he explained:

"I am relatively familiar with the classmates in my class who like to sit in the front rows, but I do not really talk much with the others. Still, at least we become familiar faces. Sometimes I cannot even remember their names, but if we run into each other on the street, we greet each other very warmly and chat very warmly. After that, I still cannot remember what they are called, or even which class they are from."

For some participants, this familiarity was shaped by class size and the frequency of contact. P18 described first-year classmates as "familiar strangers", explaining that large-class teaching made it difficult to remember who people were, even after a year. As she put it:

"First-year classmates felt like familiar strangers. You know everyone's name, and you know they are in your class, but after a whole first year I still did not know what many of them looked like. The lecture hall was huge and full of people, so you simply could not remember who was who. Later, in the second year, there were more small classes. We took major courses together and saw each other every day, so we gradually became familiar."

Roommate and dormitory ties also showed considerable variation. Some participants described warm and close roommate relationships, including spending weekends together and going out as a group. Others described dormitory ties as much thinner. P3, for example, said that students in the dormitory did not often go out together because everyone had their own things to do, their own preferred study spaces, or their own study partners. P38 similarly said that he had never even visited the dormitory next door and preferred to stay in his own small space, while P15 said that contact with neighbouring dormitories was so limited that people were "not even really familiar faces". These accounts

suggest that sharing a dormitory or being physically close could lead to very different kinds of relationships, including familiarity, companionship, distance, or simple co-existence within the same space.

Overall, participants described everyday co-present ties as an important but uneven layer of peer engagement. These relationships were built through shared routines and repeated presence, and they often provided familiarity, convenience, and low-level coordination in daily life. Their social meaning varied greatly in practice, ranging from light familiarity to closeness, distance, or indifference.

5.4.2 Task-Based, Project-Based, and Transactional Ties

A second layer of peer engagement appeared through task-based, project-based, and transactional ties. In participants' accounts, these ties were formed around getting particular things done, including coursework, group assignments, competitions, student organisation tasks, college activities, and other practical demands of university life. These relations were often specific to a task or situation. Some lasted only for a short period, while others became more regular through repeated cooperation.

Participants described group work as one of the most common ways in which task-based peer ties were formed and stabilised in university life. Repeated group assignments gave students opportunities to observe how others worked, how quickly they responded, how seriously they took the task, and how much responsibility they were willing to take. Through this process, participants gradually formed clearer preferences about whom they wanted to work with. In this sense, group work was not only a course requirement, but also a way through which students identified reliable collaborators and developed relatively stable task-based ties. P33, for example, explained that after doing one or two group assignments with certain classmates, there was a much clearer sense of their working styles, and a few fixed "group-work dazi" gradually developed:

"We had a lot of group assignments at university. After doing one or two assignments with some classmates, I more or less knew what their

working style was like. So, I have about six group work dazi. We are in the same department, so we try our best to select the same classes, so that we can deal with group work more efficiently and more comfortably.”

At the same time, many participants also described difficult experiences in group assignments, especially when groups were formed randomly. As P17 explained:

“Some group assignments, especially in electives where teachers randomly assigned groups by student number, were really painful. People did not know each other, and everyone was busy. I care a lot about my grades, so no matter what my group members were like, I still tried my best... In fact, I often ended up doing most of the work. Many people did very little, because they knew that the person who cared about the grade would do it. Since it was one group, the person who could not bear to leave it unfinished would end up doing it. Unfortunately, I was often that person.”

This account also shows that these ties were shaped by unequal investment and by students’ different levels of concern about grades. Randomly assigned groups were often described as uncertain and inefficient, especially when students did not know one another and had no basis for judging who would contribute. By contrast, repeated cooperation made it easier to identify people who were responsible, easy to communicate with, and worth working with. Other participants described a similar tendency to stabilise cooperation over time. P35 said that after meeting a few peers in the first year and finding that they worked well together, they later tried to select the same classes and continue working as a group:

“I do not like constantly changing group members. After we got to know each other in the first year and realised that we worked well together, we tried to choose the same teacher and the same class whenever we selected courses. It was convenient and efficient to keep working together like that.”

These accounts suggest that group work often produced a practical process of sorting and selection. Students did not simply cooperate with whoever happened

to be present. Instead, where possible, they tried to build more stable task-based ties with those who were seen as reliable, communicative, and worth working with.

Task-based and project-based ties also extended beyond ordinary coursework. Participants described how competitions, college projects, student organisations, and extracurricular activities brought them into contact with peers and senior students whom they might not otherwise have known. In some cases, these ties were valuable not only for completing a task, but also for gaining access to new information, experience, and opportunities. P21, for example, described meeting several helpful senior students in the residential college, who took him to competitions and helped him gain both experience and additional points in the comprehensive evaluation. P3 similarly described later-year group work as becoming more meaningful because it was more closely connected to disciplinary learning and future direction. Through an entrepreneurship project, he came into contact with a graduating postgraduate senior who offered guidance on the field and future employment. He also described group cooperation as a way of getting to know capable students from other majors within the same school, although he later tended to choose collaborators from his own major because communication was easier and their course backgrounds were more similar.

These ties did not always depend on prior friendship. Participants suggested that students could work repeatedly with people they were not especially close to, and sometimes with people they had not known well before the task began. Some of these ties became more regular over time, especially when students found others who were reliable and easy to work with. In this sense, task-based engagement could create its own form of familiarity and continuity, even when the relationship remained mainly functional. P4, for example, described being drawn into projects through student union and society activities rather than through prior closeness.

Participants also described clear differences in how these ties were organised across space and mode of contact. When task-based cooperation involved

roommates, neighbouring dormitory peers, or students from the same major, discussion could take place both online and offline, and face-to-face interaction was more common. By contrast, when the task involved students from other majors or people they did not know well, communication was often more limited and more strongly mediated by online platforms. As P2 explained:

“I think the first function of group discussion is to improve relationships between classmates, and that is probably its biggest function. But this mainly happens with my roommates, students from the neighbouring dormitory, or students from the same major, because these are the people you get more opportunities to interact with, especially when you live close to each other. We discuss both online and offline. But with students from other majors or people I do not know at all, discussion is mostly online. We have never had offline discussion, we have not even met in person, and even online we do not turn on the camera. It is just voice, or sometimes even only text in the WeChat group chat.”

A more explicitly transactional form of peer engagement also appeared in participants' accounts, in which cooperation was organised through payment or exchange. Some described paid arrangements in which one student attended class on behalf of another or completed campus running requirements for someone else. Participants explained that these practices usually circulated through informal student-run WeChat or QQ groups, where requests for paid help could be posted and taken up by other students. In such cases, the relationship was organised through exchange rather than prior familiarity or friendship. P25, for example, described paying another student to attend class and sign in when he did not want to go or was too busy:

“I feel there are just too many classes, and some are especially boring, but attendance is compulsory. So I found someone to attend for me...I look in the group for someone to attend in my place and sign in for me, so that the teacher will not deduct my participation marks. I feel I do not have enough time. For things that are not important, or when I am too busy, I am willing to pay for this. Everyone gets what they need.”

A similar pattern appeared in relation to campus running requirements. Participants explained that each student had to complete a required number of running sessions through a designated app, and that this task depended on carrying the student's own mobile phone during the run. Some students asked others to run on their behalf, while some students accepted payment or small rewards such as meals for doing so. P1, who enjoyed running, described this as a practical arrangement that benefited both sides:

“I really like running. In our university, a lot of people do not like the campus running requirement, but I like it. So people come and ask me whether they can give me some money or buy me a meal. When I run, I carry their phones as well and complete the task for them.”

Participants also suggested that these arrangements could become relatively stable over time. Some remained occasional, while others developed into repeated paid cooperation, especially when students came to rely on the same person for help with attendance or running tasks. P34, for example, described substitute class attendance as something that suited him well because it could be fitted around his own study and part-time income needs:

“Helping other people attend class for them actually suits me very well. I take on substitute attendance jobs online when the timing works for me, and I bring my own study materials to the classroom. I sit there, study knowledge from my own major, and earn money at the same time. This is more worthwhile for me than finding a part-time job outside... I know this is not good, but I really do need to earn money. There are many children in my family, and I am the eldest. I do not want to keep asking my parents for money, especially because, frankly, my family's financial situation is not good.”

Overall, these accounts show that peer engagement in university was organised not only through companionship or shared identity, but also through practical demands, repeated collaboration, and, in some cases, paid exchange. Some of these ties remained short-term and highly specific, while others became more

regular through continued cooperation. Participants described task-based, project-based, and transactional ties as an important layer of peer engagement, especially in a campus environment shaped by multiple requirements, dense schedules, and the need to complete many different kinds of tasks efficiently.

5.4.3 Selective Friendship and Emotional Support

A third layer of peer engagement appeared through selective friendship and emotional support. Compared with everyday co-present ties and task-based cooperation, these relations were fewer and more selective, and were usually shaped by trust, comfort, and willingness to spend time together beyond immediate tasks. In participants' accounts, such ties did exist, but they were not described as widespread or easy to form. Many suggested that university peer relations were more often organised around tasks, convenience, and limited familiarity than around deep emotional closeness.

When participants described closer friendships, these were usually embedded in already busy routines rather than separated from them. Spending time together did not always mean extended leisure or long emotional conversations. More often, it involved fitting in small moments of companionship alongside heavy workloads and dense schedules, such as eating together, occasionally going out at weekends, studying together in the library, staying together in the dormitory, working on group assignments, or preparing for competitions. P1, for example, described meeting close friends mainly through the opportunity created by group assignments, with most of their time together still centred on coursework:

“My good friends and I usually meet through the opportunity of group assignments, and most of the time we mainly discuss the assignment. Occasionally, at weekends, we go out to watch a film together and then have a meal outside.”

Participants' accounts also suggest that emotionally oriented interaction was relatively limited. Several implied that students were generally too busy to invest heavily in deep personal sharing, and that differences in background, personality,

and daily pressure also made such conversations less common. Some participants suggested that they did not want to take up too much of their own or other people's time with emotional talk, and that when difficulties arose, they were often more likely to keep them to themselves or deal with them in a restrained way. As P38 put it:

“To be honest, everyone is very busy. No one really has the time or energy to pay that much attention to your small emotions. When I feel bad, I am embarrassed to tell other people. I also do not really want to say it, and I worry that they might either worry about me or laugh at me.”

In these accounts, emotional support was not absent, but it was often lighter, more indirect, and less time-consuming than the idea of intimate friendship might suggest. Participants therefore distinguished between people they encountered frequently, people they could work with effectively, and the much smaller number of people they would actively choose to spend time with or turn to when under pressure. Even among these closer ties, support was often expressed through presence, shared activity, short conversations, or practical companionship rather than prolonged emotional disclosure. In this sense, friendship and emotional support formed a real but relatively narrow part of participants' peer engagement.

Romantic relationships appeared only occasionally in participants' accounts and did not emerge as a major or dominant form of engagement in university life. More generally, participants did not always describe university as a place where they expected to find many deeply like-minded friends. Selective friendship and emotional support were present, but they occupied a smaller and more limited place than more practical, task-oriented, and situation-specific relations.

Overall, participants described selective friendship and emotional support as a real but relatively narrow layer of peer engagement. These ties mattered because they offered comfort, companionship, and a sense of trust beyond routine co-presence or task completion. At the same time, they were shaped by busy schedules, limited time, and a broader campus atmosphere in which practical and purpose-oriented relations were often more common.

5.4.4 Beyond-Campus Personal Continuity

A fourth layer of peer and personal engagement appeared through relationships that extended beyond the immediate campus environment. In participants' accounts, university life did not replace earlier ties entirely. Instead, some important relationships continued across the campus boundary, especially those with family members, former classmates, and friends from before university. These relations were not part of the university's formal organisation, but they remained meaningful in students' everyday lives and continued to shape how they managed pressure, understood their university experience, and maintained a sense of continuity beyond campus.

Family remained an important source of continuity, although the form and frequency of contact varied. For many non-local students, family interaction was mainly maintained through online communication, such as messages, calls, and occasional video contact. By contrast, some local students described more frequent in-person interaction because they could return home at weekends or during short breaks. In these accounts, family engagement was often associated with emotional reassurance, everyday care, and advice, even when parents did not fully understand students' specific university experiences. As P14 explained:

“When I feel unhappy or under a lot of pressure, I write some things for my mother to read. I do not really know how to say it, but I feel that sometimes my mother cannot fully understand me. Still, she can comfort me, or from her own perspective and way of thinking, she can give me some advice.”

Former classmates and pre-university friends also remained part of participants' engagement beyond campus. In some cases, these ties continued offline because earlier classmates had entered the same university, making it possible to keep in touch in person. More often, however, such relationships were maintained across different universities through online communication. Participants suggested that these ties could provide a sense of continuity with earlier stages of life and a familiar point of connection outside their immediate

university setting. For some, these earlier relationships also felt closer and safer than many newer ties formed at university. As P10 put it:

“I still mainly chat with my friends from high school and middle school. I feel closer and safer with them. They are still the people I feel closest to, even though we now mainly talk online.”

These beyond-campus ties mattered partly because they were not confined to the immediate social and evaluative environment of the university. Compared with many campus-based relations, they could feel more continuous and more familiar, even when contact was mainly online. At the same time, participants did not necessarily describe constant or highly intensive communication. Rather, continuity often took the form of occasional but meaningful contact that remained available over time.

Overall, participants' accounts suggest that peer and personal engagement did not stop at the campus boundary. Family members, former classmates, and pre-university friends remained part of students' relational worlds, even when contact became more intermittent or moved mainly online. These ties provided continuity across different stages and spaces of life, and they formed an important background layer of engagement alongside the more immediate and situational relations organised within the university itself.

5.5 Engagement Beyond Organised Interpersonal Relations

This section turns to forms of engagement that were not organised mainly through the more structured interpersonal relations discussed in the previous sections, such as those with teachers, staff, and peers. In participants' accounts, engagement also took more self-directed and digitally mediated forms that depended less on stable social ties. These included being alone and managing one's own study, rest, and emotional state; engaging with online resources beyond formal teaching; and interacting with AI in everyday academic and personal situations. Rather than being marginal or secondary, these forms of engagement were described as an important part of everyday university life,

shaping how students organised attention, understanding, time, and self-management.

5.5.1 Solitary and Self-Directed Engagement

Solitary and self-directed engagement formed an important part of participants' everyday university life. In participants' accounts, engagement did not always depend on interaction with other people. It could also take shape through being alone, studying independently, resting in one's own space, following personal interests, or managing one's own time and emotional state. These practices were often described as necessary in a university life marked by dense schedules, multiple demands, and limited energy.

Participants often suggested that time that truly belonged to themselves was limited, which made solitary time especially valuable. In this sense, being alone was not simply a matter of physical separation from others. It was also a way of reclaiming time from the demands of classes, tasks, activities, and social obligations. As P30 put it:

“I feel university life is so busy, even busier than high school. I basically have no time of my own. Classes, group assignments, competitions — I feel like a spinning top. Sometimes I really want to find a place where I can be completely alone and rest for a while, and just relax.”

Some participants used solitary time for independent study, revision, and organising their academic work. Studying alone was valued not only because it gave students time that genuinely belonged to themselves, but also because it allowed them to work at their own pace without interruption. P13, for example, described choosing to go alone to a study room or the library so that he could concentrate more fully:

“I like going alone to a study room or the library. I do not want to be disturbed. Then I can really settle down to study and think, and follow my own pace. I find that in this way I absorb knowledge better, and when I do exercises, everything feels much easier.”

Participants' accounts also suggest that studying alone was important because listening to a lecture did not in itself mean that knowledge had been fully understood. Many implied that they still needed time on their own to think through what they had heard, absorb it more deeply, and work through exercises in order to turn classroom content into something they could really grasp for themselves. In this sense, solitary engagement supported not only concentration and time management, but also a more self-directed process of understanding and consolidating knowledge.

At the same time, solitary engagement was not limited to formal study or recovery. It could also involve following personal curiosity and engaging with knowledge on one's own terms. Some described spending time alone exploring topics that interested them beyond immediate coursework, including areas of personal enthusiasm or longer-term interest. P21, for example, said that although the curriculum contained many courses he found unimportant, he especially liked psychology and sociology, and tried to make time for these interests amid the pressure of required tasks:

“We had so many courses and tasks, and many of them were *shuike*... but I especially like psychology and sociology. I always tried to finish the university's tasks quickly and then use whatever spare time I had to read the extracurricular books I liked. At those times, I felt very happy.”

In these accounts, solitary engagement became a space not only for completing required work, but also for pursuing knowledge, information, or content that students found personally meaningful. At the same time, being alone was described as a way of recovering energy, maintaining personal space, and temporarily stepping outside the demands of group work, organised activities, and everyday social coordination.

Overall, participants described solitary and self-directed engagement as an important way of sustaining everyday university life. Because time that felt genuinely one's own was often limited, moments of being alone were especially valued. These moments were used not only for independent study, but also for

rest, personal interest, and the self-directed pursuit and consolidation of knowledge.

5.5.2 Engagement with Online Resources

Participants also described extensive engagement with online resources beyond the university's formal teaching system. These included online lectures, recorded videos, Bilibili courses, documentaries, comment threads, and other digital materials that they actively turned to in everyday study and daily life. In participants' accounts, these resources were more than background supports to formal teaching. They were themselves important objects of engagement through which students searched for explanations, revisited difficult content, followed personal interests, and organised their understanding in ways that suited their own pace, needs, and available time.

A common reason for turning to online resources was that formal teaching did not always provide sufficient clarity, pace, or flexibility. Participants described using online videos after class to review what had been taught, to find clearer explanations of difficult concepts, and to work through exercises step by step. Online resources were also used for previewing course content before class and for revision afterwards. As P2 explained, she often turned to Bilibili because it offered abundant free resources and detailed explanations, including systematic law courses and mathematics videos that helped her catch up when classroom teaching moved too quickly:

“When I run into academic problems, I tend to look for things online by myself. I use Bilibili, because it has a lot of resources, and most of them are free. There are also some quite systematic law courses, and they explain things in great detail, so I prefer to watch videos like these. Before, for advanced mathematics, I watched Teacher Song Hao's course, also on Bilibili. Mainly because sometimes the teacher goes too quickly in class and you cannot really keep up, so after class you can use videos to make up for it. Another reason is revision. There is also another uploader who works through exercises with us, so I follow the lessons on Bilibili and do

the exercises along with them, which is also a form of practice. Another aspect is that I can also watch the material in advance and preview it, because if I go straight into class, the effect may not be very good.”

Participants’ accounts also suggest that engagement with online resources was not limited to required coursework. Some described using these resources to explore topics that interested them beyond immediate academic demands. In these cases, online resources allowed students to pursue curiosity, extend knowledge beyond the curriculum, and engage with content on their own terms. P4, for example, described Bilibili not only as a source of necessary study materials, but also as a source of enjoyment and interest-based learning:

“Bilibili has a lot of learning resources on it. Bilibili is the joyful source of both my necessary study and my interest-based learning. One of its biggest advantages is the video length. For example, I like history and archaeology, so I like watching related documentaries there.”

For some participants, engagement with online resources also included interaction with the platform environment itself. P4, for example, described how the danmaku (real-time on-screen comments overlaid on the video screen) on Bilibili had become part of his engagement with the videos. Although he had once disliked danmaku, he later came to value it as a way of seeing other people’s ideas and as an extension of the video itself. In his account, danmaku could provide background information, explain references, and add further layers of meaning that were not fully contained in the main video. In this sense, participants were not only engaging with video content, but also with the surrounding informational and interactive environment through which that content was experienced.

At the same time, online resources were valued because they fitted more easily into fragmented and pressured university schedules. Participants described being able to search quickly, replay difficult parts, skip what was less useful, and return to material when they had time. Platform form also mattered. P38, for example, explained that he preferred Bilibili partly because the typical length of

its videos matched the time available in everyday routines such as meals, whereas short videos felt distracting and long dramas required too much energy:

“I quite like Bilibili. First of all, the length of Bilibili videos really fits my expectations and my time. For example, if there is a concept I do not understand, I can look for it there. I think online video platforms now have three broad types: short videos, medium-length videos, and long videos. Short videos, like TikTok, are just tens of seconds or a few minutes, and I do not like those because they distract my attention. Medium-length videos are Bilibili, around twenty or thirty minutes, sometimes up to about an hour. That length fits perfectly with meal time. I sit down, eat, and by the time I finish eating, one video is finished as well.”

These accounts show that engagement with online resources was shaped not only by what students wanted to know, but also by the practical conditions under which they were trying to study, rest, and manage attention. Online resources were valued not only because they supplemented formal teaching, but also because they allowed students to engage with knowledge in more flexible, self-directed, and personally meaningful ways. Overall, participants described engagement with online resources as an important part of how they learned, searched for knowledge, pursued interests, and organised understanding beyond the classroom itself.

5.5.3 Engagement with AI

Engagement with AI also appeared as an increasingly ordinary part of participants' university life. In participants' accounts, AI was used across a wide range of academic, practical, and emotional situations. Students turned to it to recall concepts, search for information, organise materials, prepare presentations, arrange content, and manage tasks more quickly. Some also used it as a conversational space when they felt emotionally uncomfortable and did not want to speak openly with other people.

A particularly striking pattern in participants' accounts was the use of AI during classroom interaction itself. Some described situations in which teachers asked questions in class and students immediately turned to AI on their phones in order to generate possible answers. In these moments, AI became part of the immediate classroom engagement. As P18 explained:

“When answering questions in class or doing group discussion, you do not really hear answers that are unexpected. I think a really good answer should go beyond my own understanding and make me feel that something is fresh or eye-opening, but most answers are quite formulaic. And now there is AI. For example, when the teacher asks someone to stand up and answer a question, they will quickly ask AI on their phone to give them an answer, and the results all sound very similar. Most people usually use ERNIE Bot, and I use it too, but I generally do not use it when I answer questions in class. I mainly use it when, for example, the teacher asks about a theory and I cannot remember it, so I ask it to quickly help me recall it.”

This account suggests that AI was not only used as a source of support outside classroom interaction, but had also entered the interaction itself. When teachers asked questions and students turned to AI in order to respond, the immediate engagement was no longer organised only between teacher and student. It also involved a second layer of interaction between student and AI, through which answers were searched for, shaped, and then returned to the classroom as student responses. In this sense, AI became not only a tool, but also an interactive object within the situation itself. Participants also suggested that this could shape the quality of classroom participation, because AI-generated answers often sounded similar and formulaic.

A similar pattern appeared in coursework and group assignments. Participants did not simply engage with tasks on their own, but often interacted with AI in order to search for information, organise ideas, structure content, and produce workable responses. In these cases, AI was engaged with not only as a source of help, but as an active part of how tasks were approached and completed.

Participants also valued AI because it could take over some of the more repetitive, mechanical, or low-meaning parts of academic work, such as formatting, organising slides, or sorting materials. In this sense, AI was not only used to support understanding, but also to save time and improve efficiency in everyday study. As P16 put it:

“Everyone uses AI now. It can help me find materials, arrange formatting, make PowerPoint slides, and organise key knowledge points. It can help with so many things. I feel that if I do not use it, I will fall behind.”

In participants’ accounts, this was especially important where tasks felt routine, time-consuming, or lacking in meaning, and where using AI allowed them to preserve time and energy for other priorities.

At the same time, participants’ accounts suggest that engagement with AI was not limited to academic problem-solving. For some, AI also appeared as an emotionally low-risk space for conversation. P27, for example, described chatting with Doubao when feeling emotionally uncomfortable. In her account, AI was appealing partly because it could be customised and partly because it allowed her to speak without the embarrassment, worry, or social risk that might arise in talking to roommates or friends:

“When I feel emotionally uncomfortable, I chat with AI. I like talking with Doubao. I can set the AI’s gender, age, and personality. I can customise the kind of chat partner that makes me feel comfortable. And most importantly, I can be completely open. It is not like talking with classmates or friends. First, I feel shy, and second, I worry that if I tell other people, for example my roommates or friends, they might think badly of me or reveal my secrets.”

These accounts show that AI was engaged with not only as a source of information or task support, but also as a responsive and adjustable presence in students’ everyday lives. It could assist with memory, understanding, presentation work, and task completion, while also taking over some repetitive tasks and offering a form of low-risk emotional expression for some participants.

Overall, participants described engagement with AI as an increasingly embedded part of university life. AI was involved not only in task support, but also in the production of answers, the organisation of knowledge, the saving of time and effort, and the shaping of interaction itself. In this sense, answering, understanding, and expressing oneself were no longer organised only through direct human interaction, but increasingly through students' active engagement with AI in the moment.

5.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has addressed Research Question 1 by examining how participants described their engagement in everyday university life. The findings show that engagement was not experienced as a single, stable, or uniformly desirable form of participation. Instead, it was organised across a wide range of actors, spaces, and practices, and shifted according to context, purpose, time, energy, and perceived value.

First, engagement with academic actors was central to participants' university lives, but it varied sharply by type of relationship and teaching context. Compulsory-course teachers occupied the most important place in participants' everyday study, yet engagement with them ranged from visible participation, to silent but attentive listening, to polite non-listening and performative presentation work. After class, interaction was usually thin, instrumental, and often mediated through digital platforms rather than sustained pedagogical dialogue. By contrast, engagement with elective-course teachers was generally weaker and more strategic, shaped mainly by credit requirements, timetabling, and students' rationing of time and energy. Academic mentors and dissertation supervisors were also important, but were described as unevenly embedded in everyday study, with the depth and value of these relationships depending heavily on how individual staff enacted the role in practice.

Second, engagement with institutional and organisational actors was typically episodic, task-based, and shaped by administrative routines, evaluation, and practical support. Roles such as the banzhuren, residential college counsellors,

dormitory porters, and class committee members entered students' lives in different ways, ranging from formal meetings and routine notifications to repeated everyday contact in residential space. These findings show that engagement in university life was not limited to academic teaching and peer relations alone, but also involved a wider organisational environment through which students' movement, participation, and daily life were managed and supported.

Third, engagement with peers was layered and shifting rather than organised through fixed social categories. Participants described everyday co-present ties, task-based and project-based cooperation, transactional relations, selective friendship and emotional support, and continuity with important relationships beyond campus. These accounts suggest that peer engagement was often practical, situational, and purpose-oriented, although closer and emotionally supportive ties did exist in more selective ways.

Finally, the findings also show that engagement was not always organised mainly through structured interpersonal relations. Solitary and self-directed engagement, engagement with online resources, and engagement with AI formed an important part of participants' everyday university lives. These practices were described not as marginal, but as central to how students managed understanding, rest, attention, time, and self-organisation beyond direct interaction with teachers, staff, and peers.

Taken together, the findings in this chapter show that engagement in everyday university life was diverse, relational, and context-dependent. It was organised across classrooms, dormitories, digital platforms, and wider campus settings, and involved both human and non-human relations. The next chapter turns to Research Question 2 and examines the conditions through which these forms of engagement were shaped, enabled, constrained, recognised, and made consequential in everyday university life.

Chapter 6: Conditions Shaping Engagement: Findings of Research Question 2

6.1 Overview

This chapter addresses Research Question 2: What are the enablers and barriers to student engagement? Rather than treating enablers and barriers as fixed, separate, and easily classifiable factors, this chapter approaches them as relational and context-dependent conditions. The findings show that the same condition could support certain forms of engagement while constraining others. Assessment could provide direction, urgency, and motivation, while also narrowing engagement into more strategic, performative, and outcome-oriented forms. Digital platforms could widen access to information, communication, and learning resources, while also producing fragmentation, fatigue, and the pressure of constant connectivity. Shared living arrangements could offer routine, companionship, and practical support, while also reducing privacy, concentration, and control over one's own time.

The chapter argues that student engagement in this setting was not shaped simply by students' individual willingness, personality, or interest. Instead, it was organised within a wider set of temporal, evaluative, relational, spatial, and infrastructural conditions that influenced what kinds of engagement became possible, desirable, sustainable, or worth the effort. In this sense, the issue was not simply whether engagement opportunities existed. The university did provide many opportunities, including courses, activities, positions, platforms, staff roles, study spaces, and organised routes for participation. However, these opportunities were not equally meaningful, equally accessible, or equally supportive of students' actual needs. Valued courses, useful teachers, recognised opportunities, and workable spaces could become scarce resources that students had to identify, compete for, and fit into already crowded lives.

The findings also suggest that these conditions did more than simply channel behaviour. In some cases, they transferred wider institutional and professional pressures onto students. What appeared as guidance, opportunity, or organised

participation could also carry the pressure of staff workloads, administrative demands, performance expectations, and future-oriented competition. Students therefore often experienced engagement not as an open educational field, but as something that had to be managed carefully under constraint. They ranked tasks, graded relationships, protected their own time, and distinguished between forms of engagement that were necessary, rewarding, risky, exhausting, meaningful, or simply unavoidable.

This does not mean that meaningful engagement was absent. Rather, it suggests that more self-directed, interest-based, or relationally rich forms of engagement often had to be pursued in leftover time, through students' own effort, or outside the main channels most visibly recognised by the institution. The problem, then, was not simply a lack of opportunities. It was also the narrowing of meaning through quantified evaluation, the unequal distribution of valuable resources, and the way many institutionally recognised forms of engagement were tied to records, rankings, and future selection.

The chapter is organised into three main sections. Section 6.2 examines temporal pressures, transition, and the organisation of everyday time. Section 6.3 explores evaluative, relational, and power conditions, including the effects of competition, authority, and uneven access to support. Section 6.4 turns to material, spatial, and infrastructural conditions, including campus scale, shared living, study space, bodily routines, and digital systems. Section 6.5 then draws these strands together by identifying several cross-cutting patterns in the findings. Across the chapter, the central argument is that student engagement was neither simply enabled nor simply blocked. Rather, it was continuously shaped through enabling–constraining dynamics that made some forms of engagement easier, more visible, and more rewarding, while rendering others more fragile, more effortful, or harder to sustain.

6.2 Temporal Pressures, Transition, and the Organisation of Everyday

Time

The first set of conditions shaping engagement concerned time: how students entered university, how their days were structured, and how their limited time and energy were distributed across multiple demands. Participants' accounts suggest that student engagement was not only influenced by what opportunities existed, but by how everyday time was organised and fragmented. The transition from school to university, the density of timetables, and the accumulation of tasks all affected how far students could sustain different forms of engagement, and what they had to sacrifice in order to do so. At the same time, these conditions did not simply prevent engagement. They also produced new forms of selectivity, self-management, and strategic judgement.

6.2.1 The Difficult Transition from Schooling to University

A first condition shaping student engagement was the transition from schooling to university. Participants repeatedly described this transition not as a straightforward movement into freedom, independence, or self-directed learning, but as a difficult adjustment to a new mode of life in which routines, expectations, and responsibilities had all changed at once. For many, the problem was not simply that university was busy. It was that students had to learn how to organise themselves within a setting that was less visibly structured than school, while at the same time becoming responsible for a much wider range of academic, administrative, and future-oriented demands.

Several participants contrasted university with high school by emphasising the shift from a relatively clear and singular goal to a much more diffuse and multi-layered set of expectations. P4 captured this difference particularly clearly when he described high school as organised around one overriding target, whereas university involved many simultaneous objectives:

“In high school, your thinking is very clear. You only need to study for the university entrance examination, and you do not need to care about anything else. But at university, you realise there are too many things you need to manage. You have to pay attention to notices, course selection, activities, grades, relationships with teachers and classmates, certificates, sports, and all sorts of things. It becomes multi-target.”

This change mattered because it altered the basis on which engagement was organised. In school, students had often relied on highly structured timetables, constant reminders, and a comparatively visible system of monitoring and ranking. In university, that external structure became weaker in some respects, but responsibility did not become lighter. Instead, students were expected to manage a wider range of tasks themselves. P4 further explained that in university “nobody tells you everything”, and that students must keep track of many things on their own, from course selection to institutional notices and activity opportunities. The issue, then, was not a simple movement from control to freedom, but from one kind of organisation to a more dispersed form of self-management.

Participants also pointed to the lack of guidance around this transition. Several suggested that they arrived at university without a clear understanding of how to judge their own position, what kinds of engagement would matter later, or how to organise their life under new conditions. P16 described entering university and suddenly losing the regular reference points that had structured school life:

“In high school, especially in the final year, there were monthly tests or weekly tests, and every time there was a ranking, so you knew roughly where you stood in the class and could adjust your study state. But at university there was nothing like that. We basically only found out our ranking after the whole first academic year had ended, when it mattered for stream allocation and scholarships. So at the beginning I felt very lost. You did not know what level you were really at.”

This account shows that transition difficulties were not limited to unfamiliar routines. They also involved uncertainty about how the new system actually worked and when its consequences would become visible. Evaluation did not disappear. Rather, it became less immediately legible at first, even though later consequences could still be significant. For students who had been used to frequent feedback and externally imposed goals, this could feel like freedom and uncertainty at the same time.

Other participants described the transition in emotional and practical terms. P17 recalled entering university with a disrupted rhythm after the intense discipline of school and the relative looseness of the post-exam summer:

“When I first arrived, my whole mindset and daily routine had not adjusted. In high school everything had been tight and highly disciplined, but after the university entrance examination there was that long period of relaxation. Then suddenly at university there was no one constantly pushing you, but the subjects were harder and I had no clear plan. Everything felt chaotic.”

Similarly, P12 described having to adapt not only to a new learning environment but also to living away from home and sharing a dormitory for the first time. In his account, this broader adjustment made the first phase of university life particularly difficult. These accounts suggest that the transition condition was not only academic. It was also social, spatial, and emotional.

At the same time, the transition was not wholly disabling. Over time, students did begin to develop ways of organising themselves, judging priorities, and navigating the system more strategically. In this sense, the move into university also enabled a degree of self-management and selective agency that had been less necessary under school conditions. However, the findings suggest that this more strategic orientation was often learned through trial, overload, and uncertainty rather than through structured support. The transition from schooling to university therefore acted as an enabling-constraining condition: it opened

some space for self-direction, but did so within a setting in which guidance was limited and the costs of confusion could be high.

6.2.2 Dense Timetables, Multiple Tasks, and Fragmented Time

A second temporal condition shaping engagement was the density of students' schedules and the fragmentation of their time. Across the interviews, participants repeatedly described university life as crowded not only with classes, but also with assignments, group work, organised activities, competitions, online requirements, meetings, and a wide range of routine tasks that had to be fitted around formal teaching. What made university life exhausting was often not one single burden, but the accumulation and overlap of many different demands.

Several participants described days structured by long stretches of timetabled activity. P2 explained that during part of the semester she had four days a week beginning with 8 a.m. classes, and on Mondays had classes from 8 a.m. until 9 p.m. She added that once the summer schedule ended, even the lunch break became too short to allow proper rest:

“I had 8 a.m. classes on four days a week, and on Mondays I had a full day from 8 in the morning until 9 at night. Before National Day, under the summer timetable, the lunch break was still relatively enough. But after that, the midday break became very short. I usually just ate something quickly and closed my eyes in the classroom or on the chair in the dormitory. Otherwise I could not get through the whole day.”

P5 similarly described periods in which classes, experiments, and follow-up work made university life feel continuously packed, while P6 noted that even weekends were not always protected because some courses or activities were still scheduled then. These accounts show that formal timetable density mattered in its own right. It shaped how much discretionary time remained and how much recovery was possible within the day.

Yet participants were equally clear that formal class hours did not tell the whole story. Much of their time was consumed by activities surrounding class: preparing

for tests, revising, writing assignments, completing presentations, handling group work, checking notices, responding to multiple platforms, and attending activities linked to evaluation systems. P1 described this accumulation vividly:

“One course on its own does not seem like much, but once you add everything up in a semester, it becomes a lot. One group assignment ends, and then another one starts. It just does not stop.”

P2 made a similar point when she explained that besides classes and revision, she also had to think about residential college activities because she needed the relevant activity points for comprehensive evaluation. In this sense, everyday time was not simply filled by study in the narrow sense. It was structured by a dense combination of assessed, semi-assessed, and administratively recognised tasks.

The effect of this condition was not only busyness, but temporal fragmentation. Participants frequently suggested that there were very few large blocks of open, protected time. Instead, time was broken into small pieces and distributed across many demands. Work had to be fitted in between classes, before deadlines, after meetings, or alongside other obligations. This mattered because fragmented time did not support all forms of engagement equally well. It was easier to complete short tasks, respond quickly, or handle visible requirements than to sustain slower, more reflective, or more exploratory forms of participation.

Participants also stressed that the timetable did not merely occupy time. It actively reorganised time. P4 explained that university life had moved from the “single-target” mode of high school to a “multi-target” mode in which different objectives pressed in simultaneously. What had once been a relatively clear temporal order became a crowded field of competing claims. This is one reason why students repeatedly described themselves as feeling busy even when they were not formally in class at every moment. Their time had to remain open to assignments, notices, group communication, activity participation, and the possibility of new demands appearing at short notice.

At the same time, dense schedules could support certain kinds of engagement. A highly structured day could create momentum, externally imposed routine, and a sense of being kept moving. Some participants implied that being busy prevented them from drifting completely. Yet the more dominant pattern in the data was that timetable density reduced students' room for manoeuvre. It encouraged them to reserve serious attention for those activities most closely tied to grades, progression, or recognised outcomes, while less urgent or less immediately valuable forms of engagement were compressed, postponed, or dropped.

This is why students' accounts of university time often carried a double meaning. On the one hand, the university offered many things to do. On the other, the way these were arranged meant that students often experienced time not as rich possibility, but as a crowded field of claims. Dense timetables and multiple tasks therefore enabled some forms of routine participation while constraining the depth, openness, and sustainability of others.

6.2.3 Energy Depletion, Strategic Prioritisation, and the Search for “Own Time”

A third temporal condition concerned energy depletion and the strategic prioritisation that followed from it. Participants did not usually describe themselves as simply unwilling to engage. More often, they described themselves as tired, overstretched, and forced to decide where their remaining energy could most usefully be invested. Engagement was shaped not only by the formal availability of time, but by the uneven and diminishing energy students had left after meeting the demands of everyday university life.

Many participants spoke directly about exhaustion. P1, for example, described everyday university life as physically and mentally draining even when the number of classes did not seem extreme:

“It is not the same kind of tiredness as high school. High school was tiring, but every day still felt quite happy. At university, I do not know how to say

it, but even though there are not that many classes every day, I still feel exhausted. Mentally tired, psychologically tired. Every day it is classes, meetings, attendance checks, and endless group assignments.”

This statement is important because it shows that strategic engagement did not emerge only from instrumental thinking in the narrow sense. It also arose from depletion. Students were not calculating in an abstract vacuum; they were doing so under conditions in which time, attention, and bodily energy all felt limited.

Participants therefore repeatedly described a process of ranking and sorting. They distinguished between what was interesting and what was necessary; between what would count and what would not; between what deserved serious investment and what could only be minimally complied with. P4 captured this distinction when he contrasted learning driven by interest with learning driven by institutional or market demands:

“I think learning can be divided into what I am interested in and what I have to learn. For example, I like magic and astronomy, and recently I have been learning about graphics cards. At the beginning I knew nothing about these things, but I am interested in them, so I naturally want to look things up and learn. But things like English are different. If you simply tell me to learn English, I do not want to learn it at all. But I know I need it, for future development, for the market, and because the school requires it. So most learning is like that, driven by need.”

This distinction helps explain why strategic prioritisation became such a central feature of student engagement. Students were not only choosing among many activities. They were also grading them according to necessity, return, future usefulness, and emotional cost. In this sense, engagement increasingly took the form of managed investment rather than open-ended immersion.

This condition also helps explain why participants so often emphasised the value of time that felt genuinely their own. Across the interviews, students repeatedly suggested that such time was rare. When it did appear, it was treated as precious and often used for rest, solitary study, or interest-based activity. P2 said quite

directly that she had “no time for entertainment” and “no absolute relaxation”, and several others suggested that even ordinary rest had to be squeezed into leftover moments. This helps explain why, in Chapter 5, solitary and self-directed engagement appeared as such an important part of students’ lives. It was not simply a matter of personal preference. It was also one of the few ways in which students could reclaim time from competing institutional claims.

The search for “own time” was therefore not a secondary preference. It was a response to a temporal environment in which much of everyday life felt already claimed by something else. At the same time, the need to protect this time further reinforced students’ strategic selectivity. Because their own time was limited, they became more careful about which institutional demands they allowed to absorb it.

This calculative use of energy should not be romanticised as pure self-management. It was often a survival strategy in a setting where students felt they could not do everything well, and where saying yes to one form of engagement often meant sacrificing another. In this sense, strategic prioritisation was both active and constrained. Students were exercising judgement, but they were doing so under pressure. They were not simply becoming more mature or efficient; they were learning how to preserve themselves.

Importantly, this condition was not purely restrictive. Strategic prioritisation could enable students to become more self-aware and more purposeful in how they engaged. Over time, many learned to distinguish more clearly between what they found meaningful, what they merely had to endure, and what they could safely ignore. However, the findings also suggest that this apparent agency operated within tight limits. Students often had to preserve meaningful, self-directed, or restorative forms of engagement in the margins of university life rather than at its centre. Energy depletion therefore did not eliminate engagement, but it did reshape it: it pushed students towards forms of participation that were more selective, more calculated, and more dependent on protecting whatever time and capacity remained their own.

Taken together, the findings in this section suggest that time in university life was not simply a neutral background against which engagement occurred. It was itself actively organised through difficult transition, timetable density, fragmented routines, and depletion. These temporal conditions could support routine, momentum, and some degree of self-management, but they also narrowed the range of engagement students felt able to sustain and made deeper, slower, or more self-directed participation harder to secure.

6.3 Evaluative, Relational, and Power Conditions

A second set of conditions shaping engagement concerned evaluation, relationships, and power. Participants' accounts suggest that students did not engage in a flat or neutral social field. Their participation was organised within systems of ranking, comprehensive evaluation, competition, role hierarchy, and uneven access to support. These conditions could generate motivation, direction, and opportunities, but they could also make participation more strategic, cautious, and emotionally guarded. The issue, therefore, was not only whether students were willing to engage, but how evaluation and power shaped what seemed worth doing, whom they felt able to approach, and what kinds of relations could be sustained.

6.3.1 Evaluation, Competition, and Calculative Participation

A central condition shaping student engagement was the evaluative environment within which university life was organised. Across the interviews, participants repeatedly described engagement as entangled with grades, rankings, comprehensive evaluation, scholarships, postgraduate recommendation, participation records, activity points, and other recognised indicators of achievement. Under these conditions, engagement was rarely discussed as a purely open-ended educational good. Instead, students often approached it through calculation: what counted, what would be recognised, what might affect later opportunities, and what was worth the time and energy required.

Several participants made clear that evaluation extended well beyond formal academic grades. P2, for example, explained that she had to participate in around ten collective activities each year in order to secure the activity points required in comprehensive evaluation:

“The university requires me to attend about ten collective activities in a year. Each activity gives 0.3 points, so ten activities make 3 points. Most people basically have to get those points through activities. Some activities I do not really want to attend, but I still go just to get the points.”

This account shows that engagement was not only evaluated through academic performance. It was also captured through a wider system of recognised participation, in which activities, volunteering, positions, and other forms of visible involvement could be translated into value. In this sense, university engagement was not simply something students did; it was something that could be accumulated, recorded, and compared.

For some students, this evaluative system could genuinely provide direction. It offered visible targets, identified what appeared to matter, and gave students a practical map of how effort might be converted into future benefit. Competitions, positions, certificates, and activity records were often approached because they seemed to offer recognisable returns in scholarship competition, comprehensive evaluation, CV-building, or postgraduate recommendation. Evaluation did not simply repress participation. It also organised it. It made certain forms of engagement legible and therefore worth pursuing.

However, the same condition also narrowed the meaning of engagement. Because so many forms of participation were tied to later selection, students often judged them less in terms of intrinsic educational value and more in terms of cost and return. P18 described this explicitly when she said that she had become “a very utilitarian person” after entering university, and that when student organisations came to recruit, she paid close attention to whether they offered activity points, office-holding points, or some other measurable benefit. Similarly, P6 explained that when deciding whether to join competitions, she considered

not only whether the activity was interesting, but whether the team was capable, whether there was a realistic chance of reward, and whether the effort would be worthwhile. These accounts suggest that evaluation did not merely add pressure around the edges of engagement. It reshaped how students thought about engagement in the first place.

This calculative orientation was intensified by competition. Several participants emphasised that the university environment made comparison difficult to avoid, especially when scholarship, ranking, and postgraduate opportunities were scarce. P19 described feeling that her class tutor actively intensified this atmosphere by constantly emphasising postgraduate recommendation and ranking, which made students see one another as competitors even when they did not want to. P6 similarly explained that in his selective class, strong peers and limited opportunities for postgraduate recommendation created a continuing sense of pressure. In these conditions, students were not only competing for marks. They were also competing for better positions within a wider evaluative order.

The findings also suggest that evaluation created competition around resources that were not purely academic in the narrow sense. Useful courses, supportive teachers, valuable opportunities, competitions with real returns, and recognised forms of participation could all become scarce resources that students had to identify and secure. This is important because it means that student engagement was shaped not only by whether opportunities existed, but also by how unevenly they were distributed and how strongly they were tied to future outcomes. Students were not competing only to perform well. They were also competing for access to the forms of engagement that seemed most worth having.

At the same time, participants' accounts show that not all students responded to this environment in the same way. Some became highly strategic, tightly organised, and strongly invested in measurable outcomes. Others withdrew from parts of the system emotionally and approached certain requirements in a more minimal or resigned way. But across these different responses, a common pattern remained: engagement was frequently filtered through an evaluative logic.

Students were asking not only what they wanted to do, but what they could afford to do, what would count, and what would make sense in relation to future selection and competition.

In this sense, evaluation and competition acted as enabling-constraining conditions. They enabled engagement by offering visible direction, incentives, and recognised routes of advancement. But they also constrained engagement by narrowing many forms of participation into strategic, performative, and outcome-oriented activity. What emerged was not an absence of engagement, but a mode of participation in which students increasingly allocated their effort in calculative ways. The issue, therefore, was not simply that evaluation existed, but that it organised the field of engagement so strongly that more meaningful, slower, or less measurable forms of participation were often pushed to the margins.

6.3.2 Authority, Power Distance, and Uneven Access to Staff

A second condition shaping engagement concerned authority, power distance, and uneven access to staff. Participants' accounts suggest that relationships with teachers, tutors, mentors, and other staff were not structured simply by formal availability. In principle, many channels of contact existed: teachers provided offices, consultation hours, QQ or WeChat contact details, and course groups; academic mentors and counsellors were institutionally assigned; dissertation supervisors were formally available once dissertation work began. Yet actual engagement with these roles was far more uneven. Students' willingness to approach staff depended not only on whether access existed, but on how authority was experienced, how approachable a role felt, what kind of emotional pressure the relationship carried, and what consequences students believed could follow from getting it wrong.

Many participants explained that they rarely approached teachers even when they had questions. P18 described this quite directly:

“Private research questions, I usually would not go and ask teachers, because I feel they are all very busy. If it is a course-related question and I go to ask them, what if I disturb their work? We just think we should solve it ourselves.”

Similarly, P14 explained that although she sometimes had questions, she usually preferred asking classmates or looking online because approaching teachers felt more difficult, more formal, and less emotionally comfortable than it had in high school. P19 also suggested that once she entered university, she no longer saw teachers as people with whom she could easily discuss broader worries or future plans. Instead, they felt like authorities tied to a specialised field, and this made her more cautious and more likely to censor herself.

These accounts point to the role of power distance. Students did not simply avoid staff because they were indifferent. Rather, they managed proximity carefully. Speaking to teachers could feel risky, embarrassing, or inappropriately demanding. In this sense, engagement with staff was shaped by hierarchy even before any actual interaction occurred. The possibility of access did not automatically produce usable access.

This was especially evident in participants’ accounts of academic mentors and dissertation supervisors. In some cases, these roles were experienced as enabling and supportive. P12 described his academic mentor as a highly responsible teacher who helped her not only with academic issues, but also with practical and emotional difficulties. In such cases, authority could provide guidance, reassurance, and continuity. Similarly, some participants described younger teachers, approachable class tutors, or more caring counsellors as people who made engagement easier because the interaction did not feel so distant or dangerous.

However, other accounts showed a very different side of authority. P18 described her academic mentor as someone who required undergraduates to work on tasks linked to his own projects, asked them to attend research meetings, and created pressure by repeatedly emphasising students’ weaknesses and bleak future

prospects. In her account, the relationship was not simply supportive guidance. It also involved the transfer of staff pressure and institutional demands onto students. More generally, several participants implied that roles formally designed to guide students could in practice also operate as channels through which workload, competition, research priorities, and administrative pressure were passed downward.

This point matters because it sharpens the analysis of power. The effects of authority were not only academic direction. They also included a transfer of pressure from staff workloads, institutional demands, and career logics onto students. What appeared as opportunity, guidance, or participation could also require compliance, unpaid labour, emotional caution, or strategic self-protection. This reveals micro-level power dynamics within everyday engagement. Students were not simply deciding whether to engage with authority. They were judging how authority was exercised, what kind of relationship a role implied, and whether approaching that role might bring help, pressure, or both.

What mattered, then, was not just the formal existence of support, but the way authority was enacted. Students' accounts suggest that engagement was more likely when teachers or staff were experienced as clear, respectful, approachable, and interested in students as learners. It became thinner and more cautious when roles were experienced as distant, overburdened, arbitrary, or primarily evaluative. In other words, authority did not operate as a fixed barrier or enabler. It shaped engagement through tone, distance, hierarchy, and the student's reading of possible consequences.

For this reason, access to staff was profoundly uneven. Some students found supportive figures and built stronger contact over time, especially in smaller classes or later years. Others remained at a distance, relying instead on online searches, classmates, or minimal compliance. The findings therefore suggest that engagement with staff was shaped less by formal openness than by how authority was lived in practice. Students managed responsiveness, caution, and compliance in relation to the perceived power of a role, even when that role was officially framed as guidance. What mattered was how authority was exercised,

and whether students were treated as learners, as administrative cases, or as a resource.

6.3.3 Weak Collective Ties, Instrumental Relations, and the Competitive

Atmosphere

A third relational condition shaping engagement was the weakness and unevenness of collective ties among students. Participants did not describe university as a setting in which class-based or cohort-based belonging automatically emerged. Instead, they often suggested that many peer relations were thin, temporary, or organised around immediate practical needs rather than stable emotional connection or collective identity. This did not mean that peers were unimportant. On the contrary, peers remained central to study, information-sharing, companionship, and daily survival. However, the findings suggest that the relational environment was often fragmented, and that this fragmentation shaped both the possibilities and the limits of student engagement.

Several participants explicitly contrasted university with school by saying that the class had become a much weaker unit. P17 described this particularly clearly:

“I think the biggest difference between university and high school is that the university class has no cohesion and no sense of belonging. It is just that we were allocated into such a class; it is just a code. I do not feel that I have any deep connection with the people in it.”

P19 made a similar point when she said that many university relationships felt short-lived and difficult to deepen. In her account, it often seemed as though people met, interacted around a task or activity, and then moved on again, leaving little lasting connection behind. P10 likewise described the university social world as full of acquaintances but light on deeper exchange, with many relationships stopping at surface-level contact or social media addition.

This relative weakness of broader collective ties could constrain engagement in several ways. First, it limited the sense of class or cohort as a stable source of

belonging. Many participants suggested that if they wanted sustained support, trust, or emotional comfort, they were more likely to find it in a small circle of roommates, repeated collaborators, or older friends than in the wider class group. Second, it made some forms of collaboration more fragile. Because relationships were often thin and situational, students could not assume commitment, trust, or smooth coordination across larger groups. This helps explain why many participants preferred familiar collaborators and expressed frustration with randomly assigned groups.

At the same time, these weak collective ties did not amount to a total absence of peer support. Smaller circles could still be highly significant. Students described roommates, close friends, group-work partners, and selected peers as important sources of information, practical help, companionship, and mutual support. Task-based relations could become stable through repetition. Senior students could also provide advice, experience, and strategic knowledge. In this sense, the relational environment did enable engagement, but often through selective and layered ties rather than broad collective solidarity.

The findings further suggest that competition helped keep many relationships instrumental. Where ranking, scholarships, and postgraduate recommendation mattered strongly, peers could also appear as potential rivals. This did not prevent all cooperation. Students still studied together, shared information, and worked in groups. But it did contribute to caution. Participants often implied that they could cooperate functionally without necessarily trusting others deeply or expecting class-wide solidarity. In such a context, relationships could be useful and necessary while still remaining limited in depth.

This competitive atmosphere also meant that students had to work harder to create or sustain more meaningful social engagement. Several participants suggested that close friendship, emotional openness, or stronger class cohesion did not arise naturally from institutional arrangements. Instead, they depended on luck, repeated contact, compatibility, and time that students often did not have. As a result, many students adapted to a relational world in which light familiarity, weak ties, task-based cooperation, and selective closeness were the norm.

These findings suggest that weak collective ties and instrumental relations acted as enabling-constraining conditions. They enabled students to create functional networks of cooperation, information-sharing, and selective support, but they constrained the emergence of broader solidarity, stronger belonging, and more durable collective engagement. The result was not a socially empty university, but a relational ecology in which students were often connected, yet only unevenly and partially attached.

Taken together, the findings in this section show that evaluation, authority, and relational structure did not simply sit around engagement as background conditions. They actively shaped what students considered worthwhile, what they felt safe doing, whom they approached, and how far they invested in others. These conditions sometimes opened routes into guidance, motivation, and support, but they also narrowed participation through calculation, hierarchy, caution, and competitive fragmentation. In this sense, student engagement was organised not in a flat relational field, but in one already structured by comparison, unequal access, and the need to manage the risks and rewards of proximity.

6.4 Material, Spatial, and Infrastructural Conditions

A third set of conditions shaping engagement concerned the material and infrastructural organisation of university life. Participants' accounts make clear that engagement was not produced only through time, motivation, evaluation, or relationships. It was also shaped through campus geography, residential arrangements, access to study and discussion space, bodily routines, and digital systems. These conditions provided the practical environments through which participation had to be sustained. In some cases, they supported concentration, routine, movement, and coordination. In other cases, they added friction, inconvenience, planning burdens, and further pressure. Importantly, they also shaped how students interpreted the university's priorities, since uneven facilities, patchy maintenance, and differential access could signal what and who seemed to matter more institutionally.

6.4.1 Campus Scale, Mobility, and the Cost of Movement

A further condition shaping student engagement was the physical scale of the campus and the effort required to move through it. Participants repeatedly described the university as large, spatially dispersed, and tiring to navigate. In this context, movement was not a neutral background to engagement. It consumed time, energy, and attention, and it shaped how students organised their days, where they chose to study, and how much capacity they had left for other forms of engagement.

Most participants described the campus as so large that walking was often impractical, especially when classes were scheduled in distant buildings or when the time between two classes was short. P1 explained why she relied on an electric bike:

“I ride an electric bike to class because the campus is huge. Sometimes the classes are too far apart, and walking means you simply cannot make it in time. Our dormitory is in the south and some teaching buildings are in the north. Walking would take at least fifteen to twenty minutes. In the morning I cannot get up early enough, and between two classes there sometimes is not enough time to get from one building to another, so I have to ride an electric bike.”

P2 made a similar point when she explained why she bought a shared bicycle membership for the semester. Her concern was not leisure or convenience in the abstract, but the practical need to connect dormitory, classrooms, and other daily destinations within an already dense timetable. These accounts show that mobility was built into the practical organisation of engagement. Whether students could arrive on time, return to the dormitory at midday, or move between study and rest without exhausting themselves depended partly on how far they had to travel and what means of movement they could access.

This condition could enable engagement in one obvious sense: a large campus provided multiple buildings, facilities, and sites of activity. Students could move between teaching spaces, dormitories, libraries, canteens, student organisation venues, and other locations. For some, this also created opportunities for

exploration and solitary thinking. P21 described cycling around campus in his first year partly because it gave him a form of reflective time:

“In my first year I quite liked cycling around the campus. One reason was curiosity, and another was that in this way I could give myself a bit more time to think alone. Riding around the campus by myself gave me some independent thinking time, and I could reflect on my current situation.”

This account matters because it shows that spatial scale was not experienced only as burden. Under some conditions, movement across campus could become a way of reclaiming a little solitude and reflective space. However, such accounts were relatively limited. The dominant pattern in the data was that movement consumed resources that students already felt they lacked.

Participants often described university days not only in terms of studying and attending class, but also in terms of constantly moving across campus. In conditions of early classes, tight timetables, and short breaks, movement itself became tiring. P9 explained that she often chose the library partly because it lay between the main teaching buildings and reduced the need to return to the dormitory and then travel back out again. P1 similarly noted that once she had already gone out, she preferred to remain outside for longer because going back and forth took too much effort. These accounts suggest that campus geography shaped engagement not only by determining where students went, but also by encouraging them to cluster activities into larger blocks, minimise unnecessary movement, and preserve their energy where possible.

The cost of movement was also unevenly distributed. Students who could afford bicycles, electric bikes, or campus mobility subscriptions were in a different position from those who relied mainly on walking or were more reluctant to spend money. This does not mean that movement was impossible for those without such resources, but it does suggest that the practical organisation of engagement was not entirely equal. Time-saving mobility itself could become part of what students had to secure in order to manage university life more effectively.

More broadly, the findings suggest that campus scale interacted with timetable density and energy depletion in important ways. Long distances did not operate alone. They became significant because students were already living within crowded schedules and limited reserves of energy. In such a context, moving between buildings, dormitories, and facilities was not merely part of university life. It was part of the cost of participation itself. The campus offered multiple sites of engagement, but students reached them under conditions in which movement could also be exhausting, time-consuming, and unevenly manageable.

6.4.2 Shared Living, Limited Privacy, and the Organisation of Everyday

Bodily Life

A second material condition shaping engagement was the shared and limited nature of students' living space. For most participants, the dormitory was not simply a place to sleep. It was also a place for resting, using digital devices, adjusting emotionally, studying when necessary, and coexisting with others. Yet these different functions were compressed into small shared rooms, usually with four to six students living together. Under such conditions, engagement was shaped not only by students' own intentions, but by how much privacy and control they actually had, how compatible their routines were with those of others, and how far the dormitory could support concentration, rest, and ordinary daily life.

Participants often suggested that dormitory life involved coexistence more than intimacy. Some described good roommate relations, but many also implied that simply sharing a room did not automatically produce closeness. P4, for example, described the male dormitory as a place where students were basically "just sleeping together in the same room", with limited emotional depth beyond routine coexistence. This did not necessarily mean open conflict. More often, it meant that people learned to keep to themselves, tolerate difference, and manage daily life in parallel. The dormitory, then, was not automatically a supportive social base for engagement. It could also be a space in which students tried to protect their own rhythm under crowded conditions.

A recurring issue was the mismatch of schedules and bodily rhythms. Participants repeatedly explained that whether the dormitory could function as a place for study or rest depended heavily on whether roommates' habits happened to align. P7 noted that studying in the dormitory was possible only when roommates' routines were roughly in sync; otherwise even turning on a light or making ordinary noise could disturb someone else. P16 gave a fuller account of this problem:

“At the beginning one roommate was very regular and went to sleep at around 11 p.m. every day, so we had to be very careful not to be noisy. Another roommate was the opposite and often kept typing quickly on the keyboard after midnight. My own sleep quality was not very good, so at first it was really annoying. Later I bought an eye mask and earplugs, and then it became better.”

This account shows that dormitory engagement was shaped by forced proximity under conditions of limited control. Concentration, rest, and ordinary living all had to be negotiated in a space that students could not organise entirely on their own terms.

The dormitory could enable engagement in some ways. It offered routine proximity to peers, immediate companionship for some students, and a basic residential base from which daily life could be organised. Some participants described warm roommate relationships, shared meals, and mutual support. However, the findings suggest that these possibilities were highly uneven. The same shared space could also constrain engagement by making concentration difficult, reducing privacy, and limiting the possibility of genuine solitude. P18, for example, explained that she and her roommates often went to the library partly because one roommate had a very different daily rhythm and liked to sleep during the day. In that situation, leaving the dormitory was not mainly about preference. It was a practical response to a space in which competing needs for sleep, quiet, and work could not all easily be met.

Participants also made clear that personal space itself was limited. P20 noted that the desk space in the dormitory was barely enough for a computer and a few regularly used items. P18 described the dormitory as basically functional but physically worn, uneven, and in some respects inconvenient. These comments suggest that students did not simply occupy the dormitory as a stable, comfortable backdrop to university life. They often had to work around its limitations. The dormitory provided necessary shelter and routine infrastructure, but not always the conditions for sustained comfort, privacy, or focused study.

A related issue concerned bathing and other basic bodily routines, which were not always organised within the dormitory itself. Some participants explained that shower facilities were unevenly distributed across residence buildings. In some cases, students had to leave their dormitory block and walk to a separate shared bathhouse, and access was limited by fixed opening hours. P16 described this very clearly:

“We use a public bathhouse. It is about fifty to one hundred metres from the dormitory building. It is a bathhouse, but inside there are single cubicles, so it is still acceptable. On weekdays it only opens from noon until 11:30 p.m., and only on weekends does it open from 9 in the morning. If you go too early or too late, you simply cannot shower. Every time you have to carry a pile of things there, and in winter or on rainy days it is really troublesome.”

This example matters because it shows that even basic bodily routines had to be fitted into the wider organisation of classes, study, movement, and fatigue. Everyday life was not only shaped by shared sleeping and study space, but also by the uneven organisation of ordinary facilities. Such arrangements did not directly prevent participation, but they added another layer of planning, inconvenience, and time-discipline to students' daily lives.

This helps explain why other spaces on campus, and especially time spent alone elsewhere, became so important. The search for “own time” described in Section 6.2 was closely tied to the lack of fully private space in everyday residential life.

Students could withdraw partially, but rarely completely. As a result, solitude itself became something that often had to be actively sought outside the dormitory rather than naturally available within it.

Overall, the findings suggest that shared living, limited privacy, and the uneven organisation of everyday bodily life operated as enabling-constraining conditions. Dormitories could support routine, companionship, and basic coexistence, but they also compressed multiple needs into one small environment and often made concentration, rest, and solitude harder to secure. In this sense, engagement was shaped not only by what students wanted to do, but by how much room they had to think, sleep, work, care for their bodies, and be alone within the material realities of shared residential life.

6.4.3 Study and Discussion Space: Availability, Access, and Uneven Use

A third material condition shaping engagement concerned the availability, access, and uneven usability of study and discussion space on campus. Participants' accounts show that the university did provide multiple spaces for study, including the library, teaching buildings, self-study rooms, and some shared areas in the residential colleges. However, these spaces were not experienced simply as equally available resources. Their usefulness depended on seat availability, booking systems, opening hours, physical comfort, access to power sockets, noise levels, and whether a space supported solitary concentration or collaborative discussion. In practice, engagement was shaped not only by whether study spaces formally existed, but by how far they could actually be used for the kind of work students needed to do.

The library was often described as the preferred site for self-study because it offered a stronger study atmosphere, more stable facilities, and better access to electricity than ordinary classrooms or dormitories. P2 explained that she gradually shifted from studying in the dormitory to studying mainly in the library because she needed to use her laptop for online courses, searching for materials, and writing assignments, and because the library had enough power sockets and a stronger learning atmosphere. P9 also preferred the library because it was tidier

and more comfortable than the dormitory, and because it was located between the main teaching buildings. In these accounts, the library was not simply a neutral academic setting. It was part of how students tried to secure concentration and workable study routines under pressure.

At the same time, participants repeatedly stressed that desirable study space was limited. P7 directly stated that library space was not enough, while P18 commented that the reservation system was “very humane” in design but that the real problem was still that there were too few seats. Students described needing to reserve places at the right time and monitor availability, especially during busy periods. This meant that access to a good study space was not automatic. It had to be actively managed. Concentration itself became something students had to compete for and organise.

Other study spaces were also uneven in quality. P2 explained that she rarely used ordinary self-study classrooms because sockets were scarce and badly located. P18 described some self-study rooms as “cold and bare”, especially in winter. P21 noted that some classrooms felt freer than the library because there was less silent pressure from others visibly studying all around you, but that did not necessarily mean they were better equipped. These accounts suggest that space was not only scarce in quantity but inconsistent in quality. Students therefore had to make continuing calculations about which environment best fitted their current needs for electricity, silence, convenience, atmosphere, and comfort.

The problem was even clearer in relation to discussion space. Participants often explained that the university formally offered some discussion rooms or meeting spaces, but that these were too few, difficult to book, or more easily accessible to formal student organisations than to ordinary groups doing coursework. As a result, students frequently improvised. P3 explained that when his group needed to meet face-to-face, they often chose the canteen because it was convenient and allowed people to speak more freely. P19 made a similar point, saying that dedicated discussion rooms were limited and awkward to book, so students often

ended up discussing work in empty classrooms, public areas in the residential colleges, or even in the canteen during off-peak hours.

The recurring presence of the canteen in these accounts is revealing. It suggests that students were not simply choosing informal space because they preferred it in the abstract. They were often creating workable discussion conditions for themselves precisely because more formal collaborative space was not reliably available. P9 described using canteens repeatedly for debate training and group discussion because they were easier to access, did not require complicated booking, and were reasonably convenient for students coming from different residential colleges. In this sense, students' use of space was often adaptive and improvised rather than institutionally well-supported.

Participants also implied that access to space was shaped by institutional hierarchy. Some meeting rooms or public spaces appeared easier to secure for recognised student organisations or official events than for informal project groups or ordinary coursework discussion. This matters because it means that space was not distributed only as a neutral practical resource. It was also organised through implicit judgments about which activities looked more legitimate, more formal, or more deserving of priority. The consequence was that everyday student collaboration could be supported only unevenly, even where the university formally offered facilities for it.

The findings also suggest that students' relationship to campus space was partly a learned one. Some participants discovered useful spaces only through peers or by trial and error. P8, for instance, explained that she only learned about small library discussion rooms because another group member knew how to book them. This indicates that access to space depended not only on provision but also on information, familiarity, and informal knowledge. The university offered spaces, but students often had to learn how to make them work, where to find them, and how to secure them.

Beyond practical convenience, space also carried institutional meaning. When facilities were limited, unevenly maintained, or hard to access, students did not

interpret these conditions only as technical inconveniences. They could also read them as signs of what kinds of activities, students, or priorities were more or less valued. In this sense, space shaped engagement not only by enabling or constraining action directly, but also by influencing students' sense of how well the university supported the forms of work and interaction it formally expected from them.

Overall, study and discussion space acted as an enabling-constraining condition. The university did provide multiple spaces, and these spaces made study and collaboration possible. Yet their availability, quality, and accessibility were uneven, which meant that students often had to secure, improvise, or compete for the conditions of concentration and discussion. Engagement therefore depended not only on willingness or academic need, but also on how far students could find and maintain workable environments for the kinds of study and cooperation they were trying to sustain.

6.4.4 Digital Infrastructure and Fragmented Coordination

A fourth material and infrastructural condition shaping engagement was the digital environment through which university life was organised. Participants' accounts show that engagement was not only distributed across physical spaces, but also across a dense ecology of course groups, learning platforms, submission systems, apps, and campus network arrangements. These technologies did not simply support participation in a neutral way. They shaped how students received information, tracked requirements, submitted work, coordinated with others, and remained reachable. In practice, digital infrastructure often made engagement possible, but it also multiplied the number of channels students had to monitor and produced a continuing burden of attention, coordination, and low-level stress.

A recurring issue in participants' accounts was platform fragmentation. Rather than relying on one integrated system, students often had to move between several channels at once, including WeChat groups, QQ groups, the university learning management system (here referred to as X-Moodle for anonymisation), email, and other course-specific systems. P1 described this clearly:

“For example, X-Moodle and a campus information app... X=Moodle is mainly for submitting homework. Most teachers put assignments there and students submit through the link, but some teachers also use QQ groups or WeChat groups to send assignments... There are too many platforms and too many groups. It would be better if everything could be unified in one place, so we would not have to keep clicking here and there.”

P2 made a similar point, noting that some courses used WeChat, some used QQ, and others relied on X-Moodle or email. She stressed that the inconvenience was not only quantitative but practical: QQ was easy to neglect because she did not open it often, while files sent through WeChat could expire if they were not downloaded quickly. This suggests that students were not simply overloaded by the number of channels. They also had to remain alert to the specific habits, risks, and constraints attached to each one.

This fragmented digital environment could enable engagement in several ways. It allowed quick dissemination of notices, easy coordination across distance, and rapid access to materials. It also enabled forms of contact that some students found easier than face-to-face interaction. Earlier chapters showed that some students preferred online discussion, private messaging, or recorded materials because these reduced embarrassment, saved time, or allowed more flexible learning. Digital systems could therefore widen access and make some forms of participation more manageable.

However, the same condition also imposed a significant burden. Participants repeatedly linked the coexistence of many groups and platforms to feelings of annoyance, fatigue, and being continuously summoned back into institutional routines. P4 noted that at busy points in the semester he might have more than ten course groups pinned at the same time. P5 similarly described the cumulative effect of course groups, class groups, residential college groups, and counsellor groups. P16 gave one of the clearest descriptions of the emotional experience of this arrangement:

“Especially when I have had a full morning of classes and then I am queueing up for food and open my phone, there are red dots everywhere. It feels extremely annoying. You do not even want to deal with it. It feels like being chased all the time.”

This account matters because it shows that digital infrastructure was not experienced simply as efficient coordination. It also created a sense of being continuously interrupted, reminded, and pulled into multiple lines of obligation. The burden here was often cumulative rather than dramatic. No single notification had to be overwhelming on its own. But together they produced a continuing low-level pressure that made university life feel difficult to step away from.

Participants were also ambivalent about official learning platforms. Some appreciated recorded lectures, uploaded materials, and online submission. At the same time, many found formal systems awkward, unstable, or poorly adapted to actual use. P12 was especially critical of the university learning platform, saying that it felt like something “copied from foreign universities” but not properly adapted, and that it was cumbersome and prone to crashing. This is important because it suggests that formal digital infrastructure did not automatically feel supportive of engagement. Students often depended simultaneously on official systems for formal tasks and informal platforms for practical coordination.

A further issue concerned the material conditions of digital access themselves. Digital participation depended on devices, charging possibilities, and reliable internet access, none of which were entirely effortless. Several participants highlighted the importance of power sockets in study spaces because laptops and phones were essential for learning and coordination. Others pointed to the cost and inconvenience of campus internet arrangements. P16 explained that students had to pay an initial entry fee before buying internet packages, while P18 complained that campus internet was expensive and tiered by number of devices and speed. These accounts suggest that digital engagement rested on a material base that could not simply be taken for granted. Connectivity itself had costs and limits.

More broadly, the findings suggest that digital infrastructure extended institutional demands across time and space. Because important information was distributed across many channels, students could rarely feel that they had completely finished the day's obligations. Something could always appear in another group, on another platform, or through another notification. This contributed to a wider sense that university life remained permanently open and only partially under control. In this sense, digital infrastructure enabled coordination and access while also making engagement more fragmented, more continuous, and harder to set aside.

Taken together, the findings in this section show that material, spatial, and infrastructural conditions did not simply sit behind student engagement as a neutral background. They actively shaped how students moved, where they could rest or concentrate, how they found space for collaboration, how they handled bodily routines, and how they navigated a fragmented digital environment. These conditions made engagement possible, but they did so unevenly, and often by requiring students to adapt, improvise, and continuously manage the costs of participation.

6.5 Cross-cutting Patterns: Engagement as Managed, Calculated, and

Uneven

Across the chapter as a whole, several cross-cutting patterns emerge. First, student engagement was consistently managed under conditions of scarcity. Participants did not usually describe themselves as lacking all opportunities, but as having limited time, limited energy, limited privacy, uneven access to support, and unequal access to valuable resources. Engagement therefore took place in a context where not everything could be pursued seriously, and where participation had to be distributed selectively. Students managed not abundance but constraint.

Second, engagement was strongly shaped by calculation. This calculation was not merely economic or cynical in a narrow sense. It was practical, evaluative,

relational, and embodied. Students calculated which tasks counted, which teachers were worth approaching, which courses or activities were worth prioritising, which spaces were usable, and whether a given form of participation justified its cost in time, attention, or emotional effort. In many cases, this calculation was not optional. It was a response to overload. The findings therefore suggest that calculative participation was less a sign of simple individual utilitarianism than a mode of survival within an environment structured by evaluation, scarcity, and competition.

Third, the chapter shows that valuable forms of engagement were unevenly distributed. Courses, teachers, opportunities, spaces, and support did not appear to students as neutral goods that everyone could access equally. Some were more useful than others; some were easier to enter than others; some offered better returns than others. This meant that students were not only competing to perform well. They were also competing for access to the forms of engagement that seemed most worthwhile. The result was that participation was shaped not simply by whether opportunities existed, but by which opportunities became scarce, recognised, or worth fighting for.

Fourth, the findings point to a tension between visible, institutionally legible forms of engagement and quieter, more self-directed, or more meaningful ones. Activities linked to assessment, ranking, records, or immediate payoff often moved to the centre of students' practical decision-making. By contrast, slower, more exploratory, or more personally meaningful forms of engagement often had to be pursued in leftover time and through students' own effort. This does not mean that such forms disappeared. Rather, it suggests that the structure of university life made them harder to sustain and easier to marginalise.

Finally, these patterns confirm that the conditions identified in this chapter did not operate as straightforward enablers or barriers. The same condition could enable one form of engagement while constraining another. Dense schedules gave structure but reduced openness. Evaluation provided direction but narrowed meaning. Authority could guide but also intimidate. Peer relations could support but remain thin. Digital platforms expanded access but intensified fragmentation.

Shared spaces enabled coexistence while reducing privacy. What mattered, then, was not simply whether a condition existed, but what kinds of engagement it enabled, for whom, at what cost, and at the expense of what other possibilities.

6.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has examined the conditions shaping student engagement in everyday university life. It has shown that engagement was not simply the product of individual motivation or willingness. Rather, it was organised through a set of temporal, evaluative, relational, spatial, and infrastructural conditions that worked in enabling and constraining ways at the same time.

Section 6.1 showed that engagement was shaped by a difficult transition from school to university, by dense timetables and fragmented time, and by the need to ration limited energy. Section 6.2 demonstrated that participation was strongly influenced by evaluation, competition, authority, and weak collective ties, so that many forms of engagement became strategic, cautious, and selective. Section 6.3 showed that material and infrastructural conditions, including campus scale, shared living, study space, bodily routines, and digital systems, played an important role in making participation possible, difficult, or unevenly distributed.

Taken together, these findings suggest that student engagement in this setting was not best understood as simply present or absent, supported or blocked. It was continuously managed within a wider set of conditions that shaped what kinds of engagement were possible, sustainable, and worthwhile. The next chapter builds on these findings by discussing their broader conceptual significance and by considering what they suggest about the nature of student engagement in this context.

Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 Overview

This chapter discusses the findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 in relation to the wider student engagement literature, the two theoretical lenses adopted in this thesis, and the specific context of contemporary Chinese higher education. Rather than repeating the empirical material, the chapter draws together the main patterns emerging from the findings and considers their broader conceptual, theoretical, and interpretive significance. As Chapter 2 showed, student engagement is not a concept with a single stable meaning. It is marked by definitional ambiguity, multiple perspectives, and uneven empirical visibility (Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2010; Zepke, 2021). The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is not to test whether the students in this study conformed to a pre-existing model of “good” engagement, but to interpret how engagement was understood, organised, and made consequential in this setting.

The discussion argues that student engagement in this study cannot be adequately understood as a single, stable, or uniformly positive construct. Instead, the findings suggest that engagement was selective, differentiated, and object-related; that highly visible and institutionally legible forms of participation were often prioritised over quieter and less measurable ones; and that participation was strongly shaped by evaluative regimes, power relations, and sociomaterial arrangements rather than by student motivation alone. In this sense, engagement did not appear simply as an individual disposition, nor as a straightforward proxy for educational quality. Rather, it emerged as a socially, materially, and institutionally organised set of practices shaped by unequal access to resources, changing student needs, and competing demands on time, energy, and attention.

A central aim of this chapter is to reopen the question of what student engagement means in this context, and what purposes it serves. The issue is not whether student engagement is inherently good or bad, nor whether Chinese students conform to or depart from existing engagement models. More importantly, the chapter asks what kinds of engagement are being produced, recognised, demanded, and rewarded, for whom, and at what cost. Building on this, the chapter gradually develops a contextual and interpretive proposition: that student engagement in this setting is neither a simple local version of a pre-

existing Western model nor a straightforward continuation of an indigenous tradition, but a historically and institutionally assembled formation shaped by borrowed concepts, post-socialist governance, global competition, evaluative logics, local institutional arrangements, and students' everyday strategies of adaptation.

The chapter also argues that the findings have implications not only for how student engagement is interpreted, but also for how it is known. What counts as engagement, and what can be known about it, are themselves shaped by regimes of visibility, recognition, and evaluation. For this reason, the discussion moves beyond interpreting the findings alone and also reflects on the knowledge production of student engagement and the educational purposes to which it is attached.

The chapter is organised into nine sections. Section 7.2 discusses student engagement as selective, differentiated, and object-related. Section 7.3 examines the tension between visible and quiet forms of engagement, and the problem of what is institutionally recognised as meaningful participation. Section 7.4 considers engagement under evaluative regimes, arguing that it became managed, calculated, commodified, and unequal. Section 7.5 explores engagement, power, and the transfer of institutional pressure. Section 7.6 turns to the sociomaterial organisation of engagement. Section 7.7 develops the contextual proposition of "Made-in-China" student engagement. Section 7.8 reflects on the knowledge production of student engagement itself. Section 7.9 then considers the purposes of university and student engagement. The final section summarises the chapter and prepares the ground for the concluding chapter.

7.2 Student Engagement as Selective, Differentiated, and Object-Related

A first key implication of the findings is that student engagement in this study did not appear as a single, stable, or evenly distributed condition. Rather than

emerging as a general level of “more” or “less” engagement, it was described by students as selective, differentiated, and directed towards particular people, tasks, spaces, and purposes. This speaks directly to the concerns raised in Chapter 2 about the conceptual ambiguity of student engagement. As discussed there, student engagement remains marked by definitional diversity, conceptual instability, and multiple levels of use (Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2010; Zepke, 2021). The findings of this study reinforce this concern by showing that engagement is better understood not as a singular state or an accumulative total, but as a set of situated investments unevenly distributed across different objects, relations, and demands.

Much mainstream engagement discourse still implies that engagement can be described in aggregate terms. Students are often represented as more or less engaged, institutions as more or less effective at fostering engagement, and specific practices as evidence of higher or lower engagement. Yet the findings in this thesis complicate such assumptions. The same student could be highly attentive in one class, strategically detached in another, strongly committed to a self-directed interest outside formal study, minimally compliant in a required activity, and emotionally invested in a small circle of peers while remaining distant from wider class-based relations. Engagement did not operate as a uniform attribute carried by the student across contexts. It shifted according to what was at stake, who or what was involved, and how students judged the value, urgency, or meaning of the activity in question.

This finding also speaks directly to Ashwin and McVitty’s (2015) argument that the object of engagement is often left underspecified in the literature. One of the clearest implications of this study is that asking whether students are engaged is not enough. It is equally necessary to ask: engaged with whom, with what, where, and for what purpose? Once this question is taken seriously, student engagement becomes much harder to reduce to a general quantity. Students were not simply “engaged in university” in any undifferentiated sense. They were engaged with particular teachers, with selected peers, with assessment tasks, with future-oriented goals, with digital resources, with private interests, with institutional requirements, and sometimes with the management of their own tiredness and

emotional state. These objects of engagement were not interchangeable. They carried different meanings, demanded different kinds of effort, and offered different forms of return.

For this reason, engagement needs to be understood as internally differentiated. This point matters not only descriptively but also conceptually. As Chapter 2 showed, student engagement has often been framed either through behavioural indicators or through broad claims about participation in educationally purposeful activity. Once engagement is approached through students' day-to-day accounts, however, a more uneven picture emerges. Some forms of engagement were clearly linked to formal educational tasks, such as listening carefully in class, preparing for exams, or completing assignments. Others were oriented towards social survival, emotional regulation, future competitiveness, or the protection of limited time and energy. Still others were driven by curiosity, pleasure, or personal interest, especially in online and self-directed spaces. To collapse all of these into one general category risks losing the practical distinctions through which students themselves organised their lives.

This also helps explain why the findings do not support a simple opposition between engagement and disengagement. In many accounts, what might appear from the outside as low engagement was not necessarily indifference or straightforward withdrawal. It often reflected redistribution rather than absence. Students were frequently not disengaging from university altogether, but reallocating their effort away from some objects and towards others. A student who was quiet in class might still be deeply engaged in note-taking, later review, or online clarification. A student who approached certain institutional activities instrumentally might still be highly committed to friendship, interest-based learning, or future planning elsewhere. A student who appeared detached in one setting might be conserving energy for a form of engagement judged to be more necessary or more meaningful in another. Broad or singular measurements of engagement can therefore be misleading because they flatten distinctions between forms of investment that students themselves experienced as qualitatively different.

In this respect, the study also sharpens the critique of overly totalising engagement models discussed in Chapter 2. Kahu's (2013) framework is useful in showing that engagement can be conceptualised through multiple perspectives, while Zepke (2018) argues that engagement should not be reduced to general activity alone, but understood in relation to what students are doing and what kinds of learning or knowledge construction are involved. The present findings build on these insights by showing that such action is always selective, and that the selectivity is not incidental. It is constitutive of how engagement works in practice. Students did not and could not engage with everything equally. Their engagement was shaped through continuous choices, rankings, postponements, and reallocations, even where these were made under pressure rather than under conditions of freedom. Selectivity was not a secondary feature of engagement. It was one of its defining characteristics.

This argument also complicates some familiar discussions of "Chinese students" reviewed in Chapter 2. There is a long tendency in the literature to associate Chinese learners with silence, caution, examination orientation, repetition, or strong effort, and then to read these practices either positively as diligence or negatively as passivity (Biggs & Watkins, 1996; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). As Chapter 2 argued, however, such interpretations are limited when they treat these practices as stable cultural traits or as straightforward indicators of either engagement or disengagement. The present study supports that caution. The meaning of silence, caution, and effort depended on what students were engaging with, under what conditions, and towards what ends. Silence, for example, could reflect uncertainty, politeness, strategic restraint, concentration, or a judgement that public contribution was not worth the cost. Similarly, strong effort could be directed towards learning, towards competition, towards assessment management, or towards the protection of future opportunities. What matters, then, is not simply that some recurring patterns appear, but that these patterns are situated within concrete institutional, evaluative, relational, and temporal conditions. This is one reason why the present study does not treat "Chinese student engagement" as a cultural essence. Instead, it shows how

specific forms of engagement emerge through the organisation of university life in this setting.

More broadly, if engagement is selective, differentiated, and object-related, then it cannot be adequately captured by models that assume a broadly stable level of student participation across contexts. Nor can it be understood purely as a student property. What students engaged with depended not only on motivation or disposition, but also on institutional arrangements, available resources, perceived return, prior trajectories, and changing needs over time. The findings therefore reinforce the argument made earlier in this thesis that engagement is relational, situational, and practically organised rather than fixed. It is shaped through shifting alignments between students, objects, spaces, expectations, and constraints.

For the present study, this means that student engagement should be interpreted less as a singular educational good and more as an uneven practical accomplishment. Students were constantly sorting what mattered, what counted, what could be postponed, what demanded immediate attention, and what deserved emotional or intellectual investment. This does not diminish the importance of student engagement. Rather, it suggests that engagement can only be understood adequately when attention is paid to the differentiated objects, purposes, and conditions through which it is lived. What this study offers, then, is not a rejection of engagement as a concept, but a more precise account of its uneven practical organisation.

7.3 Visible Engagement, Quiet Engagement, and the Problem of What Counts

A second major implication of the findings concerns the problem of visibility: which forms of engagement become noticeable, valued, and institutionally recognised, and which remain quieter, less legible, or more easily overlooked. As discussed in Chapter 2, one important critique of mainstream student engagement literature is that it tends to privilege visible forms of participation, such as speaking in class, contributing to discussion, joining activities, interacting

with staff, or taking up leadership roles, while paying less attention to quieter, less publicly legible, or more private forms of educational involvement (Gourlay, 2015, 2017; Gourlay & Oliver, 2016). The present study strongly supports that critique. What counted as engagement in practice was often shaped less by the full range of students' efforts than by what could be more easily seen, recorded, measured, or narrated as participation.

The findings repeatedly show that students' actual engagement was much broader than the forms most obviously recognised by institutional discourse. In Chapter 5, many participants described forms of quiet engagement that would be difficult to capture through dominant assumptions about active participation. These included attentive but silent listening, note-taking, later review, online searching for clarification, self-directed learning around personal interests, emotional adjustment, selective withdrawal from low-value demands, and the careful protection of time and energy for activities that seemed more meaningful. Such practices were often central to how students sustained learning or simply managed to continue functioning within university life. Yet they were not always easily visible, and they were only unevenly acknowledged as meaningful forms of engagement.

This point is especially important in relation to classroom engagement. Some participants did speak, respond, or occupy visibly active positions in class. However, many more described themselves as engaging through forms of concentration that did not necessarily appear interactive from the outside. As Chapter 5 showed, silent attentiveness was often understood by students themselves as serious engagement, particularly in content-heavy or difficult courses. By contrast, speaking publicly in class did not automatically indicate deeper commitment, and in some settings it could even be experienced as unnecessary, risky, or performative. The findings therefore complicate any straightforward equation between verbal participation and educational engagement. Visibility is not a reliable proxy for value.

In this respect, the findings speak directly to the literature on Chinese students reviewed in Section 2.5.3. As Chapter 2 discussed, later scholarship has already

challenged the assumption that silence necessarily signals passivity, showing that it may coexist with serious thinking and cognitive engagement (Cortazzi & Jin, 2001; Inagaki et al., 1998; Lü, 2018, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020; Zhang & Shi, 2020). The present study extends this point by showing that silence, restraint, and limited classroom expression were closely tied to classroom ecology, perceived risk, pedagogic organisation, emotional cost, and students' judgements about whether speaking was worthwhile. Quietness was not simply a cultural trait or a behavioural lack. It was often a situated mode of participation.

This also extends beyond the classroom. Institutionally recognised engagement often appeared to cluster around forms of participation that were easier to document: attendance, collective activities, leadership positions, volunteering, competition participation, formal group work, and measurable responsiveness. These were the kinds of engagement that could most easily enter records, evaluation systems, and institutional narratives of student development. Yet students' own accounts frequently placed equal or greater importance on practices that sat outside these visible frameworks. A student studying alone online to compensate for weak teaching, a student deliberately conserving energy in order to continue functioning, or a student building meaningful support through a small private friendship circle could all be deeply engaged in ways that mattered to their learning and survival, while remaining only weakly legible within formal understandings of participation.

The findings therefore reinforce Gourlay's (2015, 2017) critique that mainstream engagement discourse often reproduces a visibility bias and a "tyranny of participation", in which communicative, public, and recordable forms of activity are more readily treated as legitimate engagement than quieter, textual, solitary, or less displayable forms of academic work. The study also adds something more specific. The issue is not simply that quiet engagement exists alongside visible engagement, but that these forms often stand in tension with one another. Under conditions of limited time, heavy workload, and strong evaluative pressure, students could not invest equally in all forms of participation. Highly visible forms of engagement could sometimes crowd out quieter but more meaningful ones. Activities that were institutionally rewarded, socially noticeable, or formally

required often took priority, even when students themselves did not experience them as especially valuable. Conversely, quieter forms of engagement, including knowledge-seeking beyond formal teaching, solitary concentration, or emotional self-regulation, often had to be pursued in leftover time and with little recognition.

This tension helps explain why the question of what counts as engagement cannot be separated from the question of who gets to define it. As Chapter 2 argued, engagement is not only a descriptive educational concept; it is also shaped by institutional priorities, pedagogic norms, and wider assumptions about desirable student conduct (Gourlay, 2015; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; Trowler, 2010). The present findings do not suggest that students rejected visible or institutional forms of engagement altogether. Rather, they suggest that students frequently inhabited two partially overlapping systems of value. One was institutional, rewarding what was visible, recordable, and demonstrable. The other was practical and lived, organised around what helped them learn, cope, recover, prepare, endure, or pursue something they genuinely cared about. These two systems did not always align.

For this reason, the findings challenge any simple assumption that more visible participation necessarily reflects richer or better engagement. In some cases, visible participation did align with strong educational commitment. In others, it was undertaken strategically, minimally, or for reasons largely external to the activity itself. At the same time, apparently low-visibility practices could carry substantial intellectual, emotional, or practical significance. The distinction, then, is not between “real” and “fake” engagement, nor between “good” and “bad” students. It is between different regimes of recognition. Some forms of participation are easier to validate institutionally than others, and this shapes what becomes thinkable as engagement in the first place.

This also has implications for how engagement should be studied. If engagement is approached primarily through visible behaviour, formal participation, or recordable activity, then significant parts of student life remain analytically obscured. The findings of this study therefore support the need for a wider conceptual vocabulary, one capable of taking seriously not only voice, presence,

and activity, but also silence, reserve, strategic withdrawal, self-preservation, and dispersed forms of knowledge-seeking. Such a shift does not mean abandoning existing engagement concepts altogether. It means refusing to narrow them prematurely around the most visible and institutionally convenient forms of participation.

Ultimately, the problem of visibility is also a problem of educational value. What students were actually doing to learn, cope, and continue was often more complex than what institutional language most easily recognised. The findings therefore support the argument that student engagement should not be understood only through what is publicly displayed or administratively captured. It must also be understood through what remains quieter, less measurable, and more easily neglected, but no less central to students' educational lives.

7.4 Student Engagement Under Evaluative Regimes: Managed, Calculated, Commodified, and Unequal

A third major implication of the findings is that student engagement in this setting was deeply shaped by evaluative regimes. As Chapter 2 argued, one important limitation of mainstream engagement discourse is that it often assumes the value of the activities it promotes while leaving relatively underexamined the evaluative and managerial logics through which some forms of participation become more visible, desirable, and consequential than others (Gourlay, 2015; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; McArthur, 2023; Zepke, 2015, 2018). The present study reinforces that critique. It shows that student engagement was not simply encouraged as a positive educational good. It was increasingly organised through systems of ranking, comprehensive evaluation, scholarships, postgraduate recommendation, activity points, certificates, and other recognised indicators that made participation measurable, comparable, recordable, and consequential.

Evaluation did not merely sit outside engagement as an after-the-fact mechanism of judgement. It entered earlier, shaping what students saw as worth doing in the first place. Students were not simply engaging and then being evaluated. They

were engaging within a field already structured by anticipated returns, visible consequences, and institutional classifications. This speaks directly to Macfarlane and Tomlinson's (2017) argument that student engagement has become increasingly entangled with effectiveness, quality assurance, performativity, and managerial agendas. In this study, engagement was not only associated with learning or development. It was also drawn into a practical economy of points, records, rankings, and future selection. Under these conditions, participation became something that had to be managed carefully rather than entered into openly.

This helps explain why students so often approached engagement calculatively. As Chapter 6 showed, students repeatedly distinguished between what was interesting and what was necessary, between what felt meaningful and what was worth doing because it counted, and between forms of effort that promised return and those that merely consumed scarce time and energy. Yet this calculation should not be misread as simple individual utilitarianism. As Chapter 2 cautioned, student engagement cannot be understood adequately through one-size-fits-all assumptions or generic notions of desirable conduct (Zepke, 2015, 2018). In the present study, calculation was less a personal flaw than a patterned response to an environment in which students faced dense schedules, uncertain futures, limited energy, and strong evaluative pressure. Students calculated because they were required to distribute themselves across too many competing demands, not because educational meaning had ceased to matter altogether.

At the same time, the findings go beyond existing critiques of instrumentalism by showing that, in this setting, engagement also acquired quasi-commodity qualities. Once participation became measurable, recordable, and convertible into recognised value, it became something that could be approached in terms of price, return, efficiency, and substitutability. Participation was no longer only something students did. Under certain conditions, it became something that could be strategically purchased, outsourced, exchanged, or minimised. Practices such as paid substitution, outsourced attendance, proxy completion of routine requirements, or selective participation for points reveal that some institutionally required forms of engagement had begun to function less as

educational processes than as exchangeable obligations. In these cases, engagement no longer functioned only as a pedagogic process to be undertaken, but increasingly as an obligation that could be priced, traded, or delegated. This does not mean that all engagement became commercial in any literal sense. Rather, it suggests that evaluative arrangements reorganised participation in ways that made it increasingly legible through cost, payoff, and replaceability.

This point is especially important because it reveals how evaluation can transform the meaning of participation itself. In mainstream engagement discourse, participation is often assumed to be desirable because it reflects involvement, commitment, or quality learning (Coates, 2006, 2007; Kuh, 2009). However, the present findings suggest that once engagement is tied too tightly to measurable reward structures, its meaning can shift. Activities, positions, volunteering, competitions, and even some forms of knowledge-seeking may begin to appear less as intrinsically worthwhile practices and more as items within a hierarchy of returns. Students then do not merely ask whether something is educationally meaningful. They also ask whether it is efficient, whether it is worth the effort, whether it can be reduced to minimum compliance, or whether someone else can do it in their place. In this sense, engagement for assessment may begin to displace engagement for learning, and visible accumulation may overshadow slower or more reflective forms of educational investment.

The findings also suggest that this evaluative organisation of engagement was deeply unequal. As Chapter 2 noted, mainstream engagement literature often privileges what is visible, practical, manageable, and measurable, while paying less attention to diversity and unevenness in students' actual conditions (Gourlay, 2015, 2017; Zepke, 2015). The present study extends this critique by showing that evaluative systems do not simply classify students; they also redistribute advantage within participation itself. Students differed in the time, money, energy, confidence, social resources, and procedural knowledge they could mobilise in order to manage university demands. Once some forms of engagement took on quasi-market qualities, these differences mattered even more. Some students could use money to buy time, use familiarity with institutional rules to maximise return, or use social networks to access better information and opportunities.

Others had fewer such resources and therefore had to bear the demands more directly. Engagement was not only stratified by outcome; it was stratified by the unequal conditions under which it had to be performed.

This has an important implication for how fairness is understood. On the surface, many evaluative arrangements appeared to offer neutrality or fairness because they translated participation into standardised points, rankings, or visible records. Yet the findings suggest that this apparent fairness was partial. Standardisation did not remove inequality; it often displaced it. By treating very different forms of participation as measurable units, evaluative systems could create the impression of objectivity while obscuring unequal access to time, space, guidance, mobility, and emotional capacity. What looked fair at the level of formal criteria could therefore remain unequal at the level of lived possibility. This is one reason why the problem identified in this thesis is not simply a lack of educational resources. More deeply, it concerns the narrowing of educational meaning through a single evaluative logic and the unequal burdens produced by that narrowing.

These findings also complicate the relationship between engagement and educational purpose. As Chapter 2 showed, one weakness of mainstream engagement is that it may normalise certain kinds of conduct without sufficiently asking whether the activities being promoted are worthwhile in educational terms (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; McArthur, 2023; Zepke, 2018). The present study supports this concern. Students were clearly not indifferent to knowledge, growth, or future development. However, they often had to pursue these aims within a system that rewarded demonstrable, countable, and strategically useful forms of participation. This meant that more meaningful forms of engagement were sometimes displaced by what was urgent, visible, or rewarded. Students were not simply being asked to engage more. They were being required to engage in ways that were increasingly aligned with institutional recognition and future competition.

This argument also helps explain why the findings do not strongly support a simple version of the “second-year slump” discussed in Chapter 2 (Guo et al.,

2022). Students in this study did not appear to enter a clearly disengaged phase in the second year. Instead, many remained busy, highly organised, and strongly governed by continuous tasks and evaluation. This should not be read as evidence that evaluative engagement was unproblematic or developmentally beneficial. Rather, it may indicate that continuous pressure and constant participation demands flatten the appearance of disengagement while producing different problems, including fatigue, performance-oriented participation, and the displacement of more self-directed forms of learning.

Taken together, the findings suggest that evaluative regimes did more than encourage engagement. They reorganised the field of participation itself. They made engagement manageable, calculable, and, in some forms, quasi-commodified. They also made it more anxious, more hierarchical, and more unevenly distributed. The issue, then, is not only that students became more instrumental, but that evaluative regimes helped redefine what engagement was allowed to mean. Institutional arrangements increasingly shaped what counted as worthwhile engagement, what kinds of participation were most rewardable, and what students had to do in order to remain competitive, recognisable, and safe within the university. This does not mean that student engagement should be abandoned as a concept. It does mean that engagement must be understood not only as a positive educational aspiration, but also as something that can be narrowed, redirected, and distorted under evaluative conditions.

7.5 Engagement, Power, and the Transfer of Institutional Pressure

A fourth major implication of the findings is that student engagement in this setting was shaped not only by opportunity and evaluation, but also by authority, hierarchy, and the uneven exercise of power in everyday university life. As Chapter 2 argued, engagement is not simply a matter of student motivation or individual choice. It is also shaped by the expectations, relationships, and forms of recognition through which some actions become more legitimate, more visible, and more consequential than others (Carey, 2013; Kahn, 2014; McMahon & Portelli, 2012; Trowler, 2010; Zepke, 2017). The present study strongly supports this view. It shows that students' engagement with teachers, tutors, counsellors,

mentors, and other staff was not organised in a flat relational field. Rather, it was shaped through power distance, emotional caution, perceived risk, and unequal access to authority.

A key point here is that formal access did not automatically mean usable access. Many students, in principle, had channels through which they could contact staff: office hours, course groups, online contact details, assigned mentoring systems, dissertation supervision, or class-based support roles. Yet students' willingness to approach these figures depended far less on formal availability alone than on how authority was experienced in practice. Some teachers and staff were described as approachable, respectful, and genuinely supportive. In such cases, authority could enable engagement by offering guidance, reassurance, and continuity. However, other roles were experienced as distant, overburdened, arbitrary, or primarily evaluative. In these cases, students often managed proximity carefully, hesitated before asking questions, and limited contact even when they needed help. What mattered, then, was not only whether support existed, but whether it felt usable without emotional or strategic cost.

This sharpens the issue of power distance. As Chapter 2 showed, discussions of student engagement often invoke agency and shared responsibility, but can understate the unequal relational conditions under which agency is exercised (Kahn, 2014; Zepke, 2017). In the present study, students did not simply decide freely whether to engage with authority figures. They often judged whether approaching a teacher would be embarrassing, whether it might be seen as inappropriate, whether it would disturb someone already under pressure, or whether it might expose their own weakness or ignorance. Power shaped engagement before interaction even began. The possibility of access did not guarantee the possibility of comfortable approach.

This helps explain why caution and self-censorship were recurring features of students' engagement. In Chapter 2, the literature on Chinese students was reviewed critically, especially where silence, caution, and restraint are too easily read as stable cultural characteristics or signs of passivity (Biggs & Watkins, 1996; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). The present findings suggest a more grounded

interpretation. Students' reserve was not simply a personal trait, nor merely a legacy of prior schooling. It was often a relational strategy shaped by hierarchy, uncertainty, and anticipated consequences. Silence, hesitation, and self-limitation could function as forms of self-protection. Students were often acutely aware that they occupied a weaker position in relation to staff, that their speech did not carry equal authority, and that the costs of speaking or approaching the wrong person were not always clear in advance. Under such conditions, students did not simply lack voice. They often managed voice carefully.

This is one reason why the findings complicate any simple celebration of student voice or student agency. As Chapter 2 suggested, even where institutions appear to value student participation, the effects of voice may remain tightly shaped by institutional expectations and asymmetrical recognition (Trowler, 2010; Zepke, 2017). In the present study, students were not absent from the field of engagement. They exercised judgement constantly. They decided whom to approach, when to remain quiet, how much to reveal, and how to protect themselves in unequal relationships. Yet this agency was exercised within limits. Students were active, but not under conditions of equality. Their engagement with authority was often cautious, selective, and defensive, precisely because they had to account for hierarchy in their everyday decisions.

A particularly important finding here is that authority did not operate only through direct control. It also operated through the downward transfer of institutional pressure. Some roles that were formally presented as supportive, developmental, or guiding could simultaneously act as channels through which staff workload, administrative demand, research pressure, and career anxiety were passed on to students. This was especially visible in some students' accounts of mentors, supervisors, or other academic figures whose support came tied to expectations of productivity, responsiveness, or participation in tasks not always centred on the student's own learning needs. In such cases, engagement was not simply encouraged; it was extracted, redirected, or folded into wider institutional pressures. Students were sometimes treated not only as learners, but as administrative cases, performative units, or useful resources.

For this reason, the following formulation is central to the interpretation of the findings: what mattered was how authority was exercised, and whether students were treated as learners, as administrative cases, or as a resource. This captures something more specific than a general claim that power matters. It suggests that the form authority took in practice shaped the meaning of engagement itself. Supportive authority could widen engagement by making learning relationships feel safer and more worthwhile. But evaluative, instrumental, or extractive authority could narrow engagement, turning it into compliance, guarded responsiveness, or strategic avoidance.

The findings therefore add an important empirical layer to Chapter 2's discussion of socio-political and critical perspectives on engagement. Carey (2013), McMahon and Portelli (2012), and Zepke (2017) all warn that engagement is never politically innocent, because it is tied to assumptions about desirable conduct, legitimate participation, and the kind of student the institution seeks to cultivate. The present study supports this argument, but shows how such politics can be lived at a very small scale: in whether students dare to ask a question, whether they believe a teacher will respect them, whether guidance feels like support or pressure, and whether institutional roles invite trust or caution. Power here was not abstract. It was woven into routine contact, emotional tone, access to information, and the allocation of legitimacy.

This also means that engagement cannot be understood only as a matter of whether students comply with institutional expectations. The more important issue is how those expectations are experienced and negotiated. Students did not simply resist or submit. More often, they adapted. They calibrated closeness, managed responsiveness, protected themselves, and read institutional roles for signs of safety or danger. Such practices should not be dismissed as evidence of weak engagement. They are better understood as the forms engagement can take under unequal relational conditions. Engagement was shaped not only by what students wanted to do, but by how much relational risk they could absorb.

Taken together, these findings suggest that authority and power were not external to engagement. They were constitutive of it. Engagement with staff and

institutional roles was shaped by recognition, distance, hierarchy, and the transfer of pressure. This does not mean that student–staff relationships were always oppressive or always negative. On the contrary, some of the most enabling forms of engagement in the study emerged where authority was exercised with respect, clarity, and care. But it does mean that engagement in this setting cannot be understood without taking seriously how power was lived in ordinary interactions. If student engagement is treated only as participation, support, or motivation, then this dimension remains obscured. The present study therefore argues that engagement must also be understood as something shaped through the everyday exercise of authority, the unequal distribution of voice, and students’ ongoing work of managing themselves within institutional relations.

7.6 Sociomaterial Organisation of Engagement

A fifth major implication of the findings is that student engagement in this study was not organised through human intention, motivation, or relationships alone. It was also sociomaterially organised. As Chapter 2 argued, sociomaterial perspectives are important because they move beyond treating space, technology, and material arrangements as mere background or “context” and instead consider them as constitutive of how engagement is enacted in practice (Bligh, 2019; Goodyear et al., 2018; Gourlay, 2015; Gourlay & Oliver, 2016). The present study strongly supports this argument. It shows that students’ engagement was shaped through their ongoing relations with campus geography, transport, dormitory arrangements, study spaces, sockets, bathing facilities, digital platforms, devices, and communication infrastructures. These were not peripheral conditions around engagement. They were part of how engagement became possible, difficult, exhausting, or sustainable in the first place.

Much mainstream engagement discourse still tends to imagine participation in relatively human-centred terms. Engagement is often discussed as something produced by student effort, teacher support, curriculum design, or institutional opportunity, while material arrangements appear only as supporting conditions. Yet the findings in this thesis suggest that the practical organisation of engagement depended heavily on the material and infrastructural environment.

Students did not simply decide to engage and then carry out that intention in a neutral setting. They moved across a large campus, calculated travel time, relied on bicycles or electric bikes, searched for quiet or usable spaces, adapted to limited sockets and uneven study environments, negotiated shared dormitory life, fitted bathing and rest into fixed routines, and managed learning across multiple digital systems. Engagement was not merely located in space and infrastructure. It was actively organised through them.

The findings therefore reinforce Gourlay and Oliver's (2016) argument that study practices spill across institutional and personal settings, and that spaces are not simply containers for learning but are made and remade through practice. In this study, students' engagement was distributed across lecture rooms, dormitories, libraries, canteens, corridors, campus roads, online platforms, and private digital devices. What mattered was not only where students were formally expected to study, but how they assembled workable conditions for study and participation across these settings. A canteen could become a discussion room when formal collaborative space was limited. A bicycle journey across campus could become part of how a student protected time, reduced lateness, or created a little reflective solitude. A dormitory desk, a library seat, a power socket, or a functioning internet connection could become crucial to whether study was manageable at all. This suggests that engagement should be understood not simply as located in different sites, but as emerging through the relations that students built among spaces, artefacts, infrastructures, and routines.

This is especially visible in relation to space. As Chapter 2 noted, sociomaterial work and related critiques of mainstream engagement have challenged the tendency to privilege visible participation in formal educational settings while neglecting the material organisation of academic life (Gourlay, 2015, 2017). The present study extends this critique by showing that space shaped not only where engagement occurred, but also what forms of engagement were practical. The scale of the campus mattered because movement itself consumed time and energy. Study spaces mattered because concentration depended on seat availability, comfort, electricity supply, and relative quiet. Discussion space mattered because collaboration was harder to sustain when dedicated rooms

were scarce or awkward to access. Shared dormitories mattered because privacy, sleep, and study were compressed into the same small living environment. In this setting, students' engagement cannot be adequately understood without taking seriously the spatial frictions through which it was organised.

The same applies to everyday bodily life. One of the more important contributions of the findings is to show that bodily maintenance was not separate from engagement. Students' capacity to participate was affected by where they could sleep, rest, wash, withdraw, and regain energy. Engagement literature often discusses well-being, support, or student experience at a relatively general level, while leaving ordinary bodily routines underexamined. Yet in this study, such routines were part of the practical organisation of academic life. Shared dormitories, limited privacy, conflicting schedules, and even the need to plan access to public bathhouses with restricted opening times all shaped how students managed themselves day to day. These conditions did not simply inconvenience students after learning had taken place; they were folded into the conditions under which learning, concentration, recovery, and participation could be sustained at all. Student engagement was not just cognitively or socially organised. It was also bodily organised.

Digital infrastructure provides a further layer to this sociomaterial account. As Chapter 2 suggested, contemporary student engagement increasingly unfolds across hybrid physical and digital settings rather than within neatly bounded educational sites (Bergdahl et al., 2024; Cheng, 2024; Gourlay & Oliver, 2016). The present findings strongly support this view. Students' engagement was distributed across X-Moodle, WeChat groups, QQ groups, email, campus apps, mobile phones, laptops, Wi-Fi arrangements, and charging infrastructures. These technologies did not simply facilitate study. They structured communication, attention, obligation, and timing. Fragmented digital systems required students to remain continuously alert across multiple channels, while devices and connectivity became indispensable to accessing materials, submitting work, coordinating with others, and supplementing formal teaching. Digital engagement cannot be understood simply as an additional layer attached

to otherwise stable educational practices. It was part of the basic organisation of everyday university life.

At the same time, the findings complicate any celebratory account of digital flexibility. Digital systems widened access in some respects, but they also extended institutional demands across time and space. Students were not only studying through technology; they were also being continuously reached, reminded, summoned, and coordinated through it. The result was a form of infrastructural attentiveness in which students had to keep monitoring multiple groups, notifications, systems, and deadlines even when formally “out of class”. In this respect, the findings resonate with Chapter 2’s argument that engagement in contemporary higher education is increasingly mediated through platforms and infrastructures, but they also push further by showing how fragmentation itself becomes a shaping condition. Digital systems not only supported participation; they also produced fatigue, interruption, and low-level pressure.

This also suggests that material and digital arrangements were implicated in the unequal distribution of engagement. Students did not all encounter infrastructure under the same conditions. Access to mobility tools, familiarity with campus space, knowledge of how to secure desirable study environments, affordability of internet access, quality of devices, and the ability to improvise around infrastructural limitations all mattered. Sociomaterial organisation was not neutral. It shaped who could study where, under what conditions, with what degree of comfort, and at what cost. The findings therefore add to Chapter 2’s critique of engagement research that underplays lived inequality. Material and infrastructural arrangements did not simply support or hinder all students equally; they were part of how engagement was differentiated in practice.

More broadly, these findings reinforce the decision made in this thesis to adopt a sociomaterial lens in order to interpret student engagement as emergent and practically organised. Engagement was not simply something students possessed internally and then expressed externally. Nor was it only the product of interpersonal relationships. It was assembled through ongoing alignments among students, spaces, devices, platforms, routines, artefacts, and institutional

arrangements. This does not mean that human intention disappears. Rather, it means that intention itself was enacted within material relations that enabled some forms of engagement while making others more difficult, more costly, or more fragile.

For the present study, this has an important conceptual implication. If engagement is sociomaterially organised, then it cannot be adequately understood through human-centred, participation-centred, or classroom-centred models alone. It must also be understood through the infrastructures, spaces, and artefacts through which everyday university life is lived. This makes engagement more than a matter of visible participation or reported motivation. It becomes a question of how students assemble workable conditions for learning, coping, and continuing across hybrid campus life. In this sense, sociomaterial organisation is not a supplementary dimension of student engagement. It is one of the ways engagement itself takes form.

7.7 Towards a Contextual Proposition: Made-in-China Student

Engagement

The preceding discussion suggests that student engagement in this study cannot be fully understood either through a generic mainstream model or through broad cultural explanations of “Chinese students”. A more contextually grounded interpretation is needed. For this reason, this thesis proposes “Made-in-China” student engagement not as a fixed category, a nationally exhaustive definition, or a claim about some uniquely Chinese essence, but as an interpretive proposition for understanding how engagement was produced, organised, recognised, and lived in this setting. Its purpose is not to label Chinese students with a new formula. Rather, it is to make a familiar concept strange again by asking what counts as engagement here, who defines it, whose purposes it serves, and what kinds of student subjectivity it helps produce.

This proposition follows directly from the concerns raised in Chapter 2. As the literature review showed, student engagement is already conceptually unstable and internally differentiated (Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2010; Zepke, 2021). In the

Chinese context, this instability is intensified by the fact that engagement entered higher education largely as a borrowed and translated concept, tied closely to survey-based measurement, quality discourse, and institutional diagnosis (Ross et al., 2014; Shi et al., 2024). At the same time, Chinese engagement research has often developed most strongly where engagement can be measured, compared, modelled, or linked to educational process and student outcomes. This has generated important knowledge, but it has also encouraged a tendency to treat engagement as if it were already conceptually settled and institutionally intelligible. The present study resists that assumption. It suggests that, in this setting, engagement is not best treated as a pre-given benchmark against which students can be assessed. It is better understood as something assembled through historically specific institutional arrangements, evaluative systems, social norms, spatial conditions, and students' own strategies of response.

In this sense, "Made-in-China" student engagement is not a simple local version of a pre-existing Western model. Nor is it a straightforward continuation of some timeless indigenous tradition. The findings suggest something more conjunctural and assembled. Engagement in this setting was shaped through the intersection of post-socialist governance, global competition, evaluative logics, local institutional arrangements, and students' everyday strategies of adaptation. It was influenced by the wider pressures of expansion, competition, quality discourse, and future selection, but also by campus-specific systems of ranking, activity recording, organised participation, platform coordination, and relational hierarchy. Students did not encounter engagement as a free educational field. They encountered it through timetables, points, records, authority relations, shared dormitories, digital fragmentation, competition for scarce opportunities, and the need to preserve limited time and energy. The term "Made-in-China" matters here because it draws attention to engagement as something assembled under particular historical and institutional conditions rather than simply transferred intact from elsewhere.

This also helps avoid two common simplifications. The first is to explain Chinese student engagement mainly through cultural essentialism. As Chapter 2 argued, broad interpretations of the "Chinese learner" often overstate stable traits such

as silence, caution, repetition, or deference to authority, while underplaying the concrete pedagogic, evaluative, and relational conditions in which such practices take shape (Biggs & Watkins, 1996; Grimshaw, 2007; Wang, 2013; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). The present study supports that critique. It shows that many practices often read as “typically Chinese” cannot be understood adequately as fixed cultural dispositions. Silence may be tied to risk calculation, politeness, concentration, or the judgement that speaking is not worth the cost. Strategic compliance may reflect not passivity but pressure, overload, or competition. Strong effort may be directed towards knowledge, assessment, future security, or the management of institutional demands. In this sense, “Made-in-China” student engagement does not describe a national character. It points instead to the situated formation of engagement under specific conditions of university life in China.

The second simplification is to read engagement in China only as another case of neoliberal higher education. Chapter 2 showed that important critiques of mainstream engagement have linked it to performativity, managerialism, accountability, and market-oriented agendas (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; Zepke, 2018). These critiques are highly relevant to the present study, and the findings clearly resonate with them. Engagement in this setting was indeed tied to visibility, measurement, comparison, and institutional performance. However, the present study suggests that such critiques are not sufficient on their own. In this context, engagement was shaped not only by market-like or managerial rationalities, but also by political, institutional, and hierarchical arrangements that cannot be reduced to neoliberalism alone. What mattered was not simply that students were encouraged to optimise themselves, but that engagement was also folded into local logics of classification, recognition, authority, and organised participation. In this sense, “Made-in-China” student engagement points to a formation in which global higher education discourses, local governance practices, and students’ situated negotiations are entangled rather than neatly separable.

A further reason for proposing this formulation is that it helps make visible the internal contradictions of engagement in this setting. The findings across

Chapters 5 and 6 do not point to a coherent or harmonious engagement culture. They point to a field marked by tension. Students were encouraged to engage, but often under conditions that produced fatigue, calculation, and fragmentation. Engagement opportunities existed, yet many were unequally distributed, weakly meaningful, or closely tied to future competition. Institutional arrangements seemed to reward fairness through standardisation, but also generated new inequalities through their dependence on time, money, strategic knowledge, and access to support. Students were busy and highly organised, yet often described themselves as tired, pressured, and internally divided. More visible forms of engagement were often institutionally privileged, while quieter forms of knowledge-seeking, self-preservation, and meaningful relation had to be pursued in the margins. “Made-in-China” student engagement is not a unified model. It is a contradictory formation.

This contradiction is important because it shifts the discussion away from the question of whether Chinese students are properly engaged according to existing frameworks. That is not the main issue. The more important issue is what kinds of engagement are being made possible and impossible, legitimate and marginal, rewarding and costly. In this study, some forms of engagement were highly visible and heavily organised, yet only weakly meaningful from the student perspective. Others were educationally or personally important, yet harder to sustain and less likely to count institutionally. This suggests that the concept of engagement must itself be reopened, rather than simply applied. “Made-in-China” student engagement, then, is not about measuring distance from an established norm. It is about showing that the norm itself becomes unstable once we examine how engagement is assembled in practice.

For this reason, the significance of the proposition lies not in naming a new national subtype of engagement, but in re-problematizing the concept. It invites us to treat student engagement not as a self-evident educational good, but as a contested and situated formation. In this thesis, that formation was shaped through translated concepts, borrowed tools, local institutional systems, evaluative pressures, spatial and digital arrangements, unequal relationships, and students’ own strategies of coping, selecting, enduring, and pursuing what

mattered to them. “Made-in-China” student engagement is therefore best understood as a contextual and interpretive proposition: one that captures how a familiar concept is remade when examined through the lived realities of undergraduate life in this setting.

7.8 Rethinking the Knowledge Production of Student Engagement

A further implication of the findings concerns not only student engagement as an educational phenomenon, but also the way student engagement is produced as knowledge. As Chapter 2 showed, the field is marked by conceptual ambiguity, uneven theoretical development, and strong methodological selectivity (Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2010; Zepke, 2021). Mainstream engagement research has generated important knowledge, especially where participation can be measured, compared, linked to outcomes, and translated into institutional action (Coates, 2006, 2007; Kuh, 2009; McCormick et al., 2013). At the same time, the literature review also showed that such work often privileges what is visible, practical, measurable, and manageable, while quieter, less legible, or more ambiguous forms of engagement are more easily overlooked (Gourlay, 2015, 2017; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; Zepke, 2015, 2018). The present study strengthens that critique by showing that these tendencies do not merely shape how engagement is studied; they also shape what engagement comes to mean.

Once student engagement is approached mainly through indicators, benchmarks, survey dimensions, and institutional categories, the concept becomes easier to stabilise than to question. Engagement begins to appear as something already known: a measurable level of participation, a sign of educational quality, or a positive attribute to be promoted and improved. Yet the findings in this thesis suggest that such stabilisation comes at a cost. It can narrow attention towards what is countable, visible, recordable, and reportable, while making it harder to see engagement as contradictory, fluid, object-related, emotionally uneven, and materially organised. What appears as conceptual clarity may partly be an effect of methodological and institutional simplification.

This issue is especially significant in the Chinese context. As Chapter 2 showed, student engagement entered Chinese higher education largely as a borrowed, translated, and reconstructed concept, tied closely to survey development, educational diagnosis, and quality discourse (Ross et al., 2014; Shi et al., 2024). This trajectory has produced important local innovation, but it has also meant that engagement has often been discussed through the language of learning investment, educational process, measurable gains, and institutional enhancement. At the same time, official and policy language has often favoured broad developmental and reform-oriented narratives. The result is that student engagement can easily appear as something already settled in meaning: something unquestionably desirable, measurable, and directionally positive. The present study suggests that this is precisely where greater caution is needed. What is lost when engagement is approached primarily as a metric, a diagnosis, or a broad educational slogan is the complexity of how it is actually lived.

The findings in this thesis indicate the need for a more open and context-sensitive way of producing knowledge about student engagement. Such an approach would not begin by assuming that engagement is best understood through participation frequency, public interaction, or institutionally recognised activity alone. Nor would it rely too heavily on binary categories such as engaged/disengaged, active/passive, or positive/negative participation. Instead, it would need to attend more carefully to lived experience, bodily strain, emotional ambivalence, ambiguity, contradiction, and the uneven organisation of everyday university life. It would need to take seriously not only what students do, but how they interpret what they are doing, what they are trying to protect, what they are unable to sustain, and what forms of engagement become meaningful only when seen from within students' own practical worlds.

This point connects directly to Gourlay's (2015, 2017) critique of participation-centred engagement discourse. If dominant frameworks privilege communicative, public, and observable forms of participation, then forms of study that are quieter, more dispersed, more textual, more solitary, or less administratively visible risk becoming epistemically marginal. The present study supports this critique, but also extends it. It suggests that what gets marginalised is not only a set of

behaviours, but also a whole way of knowing student life. Once engagement is repeatedly framed through what can be displayed, captured, and validated, students' uncertainty, hesitation, self-preservation, strategic withdrawal, and conflicted forms of effort become harder to recognise as central rather than residual. What is excluded is not simply "non-visible participation", but a fuller account of how university life is actually inhabited.

The findings also support Macfarlane and Tomlinson's (2017) concern that student engagement has become entangled with performativity, quality assurance, and managerial agendas. However, this study suggests that the implications extend beyond institutional practice into knowledge production itself. A performative field does not simply reward visible participation; it also generates forms of research and institutional understanding that privilege what can be demonstrated and improved. In this sense, the problem is not only that students may be pushed towards more visible forms of engagement. It is also that scholars, institutions, and policies may come to know engagement primarily through those same visible forms. The epistemological consequence is a narrowing of the concept around what is easiest to recognise institutionally.

For this reason, the contribution of this thesis is not only empirical but also methodological and epistemological. By remaining close to students' accounts of day-to-day campus life, it becomes possible to see engagement not as a settled benchmark but as a lived and interpretive object. A qualitative, campus-based approach cannot replace all other forms of engagement research, nor does it claim to do so. But it can show what tends to disappear when engagement is approached mainly through surveys, indicators, and formal institutional categories. It can make visible the ordinary arrangements, mixed motives, embodied strains, practical calculations, and quiet forms of persistence through which student engagement is actually sustained.

This does not mean that existing engagement definitions are simply wrong. Nor does it require abandoning the concept. Rather, it means resisting the tendency to narrow student engagement too quickly around institutionally convenient forms of evidence. A more adequate knowledge production of engagement would need

to preserve conceptual openness, remain alert to context, and allow for contradiction rather than forcing coherence too early. It would need to accept that engagement may involve not only visible participation and positive commitment, but also fatigue, pressure, silence, withdrawal, divided motives, and efforts to preserve the self under institutional demand. Such a shift would not weaken engagement as an object of study. On the contrary, it would make it more truthful to the realities of contemporary university life.

Ultimately, rethinking the knowledge production of student engagement is not a secondary theoretical exercise. It is part of the substantive argument of this thesis. If the concept is produced through narrow methods, narrow assumptions, and narrow regimes of recognition, then the realities it can capture will also remain narrow. The present study therefore argues for a more open, context-sensitive, and empirically grounded way of producing knowledge about student engagement: one that is able to move beyond broad positive abstractions and towards the lived, uneven, and often contradictory realities through which engagement is made and remade in everyday university life.

7.9 The Purposes of University and Student Engagement

The discussion so far suggests that the question is not whether student engagement is desirable in any general sense. Rather, the more pressing issue is what student engagement is for, whom it serves, and what kinds of students and university relations it helps produce. As Chapter 2 showed, mainstream engagement discourse has often been closely associated with student success, retention, belonging, quality enhancement, and institutional improvement (Coates, 2006, 2007; Kuh, 2009; Thomas, 2012; Zepke, 2018). These are not trivial concerns, and the present study does not reject them. However, the findings suggest that once engagement becomes too tightly aligned with measurement, evaluation, visibility, and institutional performance, its educational purposes can become narrowed. The issue is therefore not that student engagement is inherently problematic, but that its aims and beneficiaries can no longer be taken for granted.

One implication of the findings is that the university in this setting often appeared to ask students for continuous participation without clearly defining where the boundary of “enough” lay. Students were expected to study, attend, respond, compete, accumulate, and remain developmentally active across multiple fronts, yet the rewards for doing more were often open-ended and the costs were largely borne by students themselves. Under such conditions, engagement could become difficult to distinguish from obligation, and self-development could become difficult to distinguish from permanent optimisation. This raises a question often left implicit in engagement discourse: how much engagement is enough, and who gets to decide? If students are encouraged to participate ever more visibly and productively, without a clear educational limit or principle of sufficiency, then engagement risks becoming a mechanism through which anxiety is normalised rather than relieved.

This concern is closely connected to the kind of student subjectivity that engagement arrangements help produce. Across the findings, students were not simply being encouraged to become active learners in an open educational sense. They were also being shaped into subjects who monitored themselves, ranked their activities, managed their own visibility, calculated return, protected scarce resources, and adapted strategically to evaluative conditions. In this respect, the study supports concerns raised in Chapter 2 that engagement is never just about participation, but also about the forms of conduct and selfhood that institutions privilege and reward (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; McMahon & Portelli, 2012; Zepke, 2017, 2018). The question that follows is not only whether students are becoming more engaged, but what they are being encouraged to become through engagement. Are universities cultivating intellectually curious, socially grounded, and personally developing students, or are they increasingly cultivating students who must continually demonstrate value within a fixed evaluative order?

The findings do not support a simple or romantic answer to this question. Students were clearly not passive victims of the university. They exercised judgement, developed strategies, sought meaningful forms of engagement, and often built lives that exceeded institutional expectations. Yet their accounts also

suggest that much of this meaningful engagement had to be pursued in the margins: in leftover time, in informal spaces, through self-directed effort, or beyond the main channels most visibly recognised by the institution. This matters because it implies that what students may value most educationally is not always what institutions most visibly reward. Knowledge-seeking, careful thought, friendship, emotional recovery, and private forms of growth often remained central to students' lives, but were not always treated as the most countable or most institutionally legible forms of engagement. The present study therefore suggests that the problem is not simply the absence of developmental or educational aims, but the way these aims can be displaced by narrower systems of recognition.

This has implications for how the relationship between students and universities is understood. In much engagement discourse, students are positioned as participants, partners, co-producers, or beneficiaries of institutional provision. These formulations can be valuable, but the present findings suggest that they are not sufficient on their own. Students were also contributing their time, attention, affective energy, and sometimes unpaid labour to the daily functioning and institutional life of the university. They were not merely receiving an educational service. Nor were they simply consumers purchasing a credential. Rather, they were part of a more unequal and demanding exchange in which the university also depended on their visibility, compliance, activity, and participation to sustain its evaluative, organisational, and developmental arrangements. This is one reason why the question of what universities owe students cannot be reduced to support provision or employability outcomes alone. It also concerns whether institutions recognise the costs students bear in order to remain engaged under contemporary conditions.

A further implication concerns the place of knowledge itself. As Chapter 2 noted, many mainstream and policy-oriented accounts of engagement justify the concept in the name of learning, understanding, development, and educational purpose (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Kuh, 2009; Zepke, 2018). Yet the findings in this thesis suggest that forms of engagement most directly tied to knowledge were not always those most strongly prioritised in practice. Students frequently

had to seek knowledge outside formal teaching, supplement weak provision through online resources, or preserve small pockets of time for more meaningful intellectual engagement beyond the most visible and rewarded tasks. This does not mean that knowledge had disappeared as a university value. Rather, it suggests that knowledge-oriented engagement was often displaced by other urgent demands, including assessment, records, organised participation, and future competition. The consequence is not that engagement and learning are unrelated, but that their relationship becomes unstable under heavy evaluative pressure.

For this reason, the present study argues that the point is not to reject student engagement as such, but to reopen questions about its aims, meanings, and beneficiaries. Engagement should not be assumed to be valuable simply because it is visible, measurable, or highly active. Nor should more participation automatically be equated with better education. A more adequate understanding would ask whether particular forms of engagement help students develop understanding, judgement, relation, and room to grow, or whether they merely intensify compliance, comparison, and exhaustion. This also means taking seriously the possibility that withdrawal from some demands, protection of one's own time, or refusal of low-value participation may sometimes be educationally meaningful acts rather than signs of deficit.

Eventually, this study suggests that student engagement needs to be reconnected to broader questions about what university education is for. If universities are to support students not only as performers of measurable participation but as developing persons, then engagement cannot be reduced to what is easiest to monitor, compare, and reward. It must also leave room for uneven rhythms, changing needs, quieter forms of study, and forms of growth that are not immediately visible in institutional records. In this sense, the contribution of the present study is not to dismiss student engagement, but to insist that it should remain open to critical questioning. The central issue is no longer simply whether students engage, but what kinds of engagement are being made possible, encouraged, and normalised, and what sort of university life these arrangements make imaginable.

7.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed the findings of the study in relation to the wider student engagement literature, the two theoretical lenses adopted in this thesis, and the specific context of contemporary Chinese higher education. It has argued that student engagement in this setting cannot be adequately understood as a single, stable, or uniformly positive construct. Instead, the discussion has shown that engagement was selective, differentiated, and object-related; that highly visible and institutionally legible forms of participation were often prioritised over quieter and less measurable ones; and that engagement was organised through evaluative regimes, power relations, and sociomaterial conditions rather than through student motivation alone.

Section 7.2 showed that engagement was not experienced as a general level of participation, but as a differentiated set of investments distributed unevenly across people, tasks, spaces, and purposes. Section 7.3 demonstrated that what counted as engagement was shaped by visibility and institutional recognition, and that quieter forms of study and self-management were often central to students' educational lives even when they remained weakly legible. Section 7.4 argued that under evaluative regimes, engagement became managed, calculated, commodified, and unequal, as participation was tied to rankings, records, rewards, and future competition. Section 7.5 further showed that engagement was shaped by hierarchy, power distance, and the uneven exercise of authority, including the transfer of institutional pressure onto students. Section 7.6 demonstrated that engagement was also sociomaterially organised through spaces, infrastructures, digital systems, bodily routines, and the practical work of assembling workable conditions for learning and survival.

Building on these discussions, Section 7.7 proposed "Made-in-China" student engagement as a contextual and interpretive proposition rather than a fixed national category. This proposition was intended to capture how engagement in this setting was assembled through the intersection of borrowed concepts, local institutional arrangements, evaluative systems, social norms, and students' own strategies of adaptation. Section 7.8 then argued that the knowledge production

of student engagement itself needs to be reconsidered, since dominant frameworks often privilege what is visible, measurable, and institutionally useful while marginalising ambiguity, contradiction, embodiment, and lived experience. Section 7.9 finally returned to broader questions of educational purpose, arguing that the issue is not whether engagement is good in itself, but what kinds of engagement are being encouraged, rewarded, and normalised, for whom, and towards what vision of university life.

Taken together, this chapter has shown that student engagement in this study was neither simply present nor absent, nor simply good or bad. It was a contested, uneven, and practically organised formation shaped by the interweaving of institutional demands, evaluative pressures, material arrangements, relational hierarchies, and students' own efforts to cope, persist, and pursue what mattered to them. In this sense, the contribution of the discussion is not to offer a new universal definition of engagement, but to reopen the concept through a contextual, critical, and empirically grounded account. The final chapter draws these arguments together by summarising the overall contributions of the thesis, acknowledging its limitations, and outlining directions for future research.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Overview

This chapter concludes the thesis. It returns to the purpose of the study and summarises the main findings in relation to the two research questions. It then revisits the contributions of the study and considers several implications arising from the analysis. The chapter also acknowledges the limitations of the research and suggests directions for future work. It ends by restating the central argument developed across the thesis.

8.2 Returning to the Purpose of the Study

This study examined Chinese undergraduate engagement as it was described and organised in everyday campus life. Rather than beginning from a predefined model of what an engaged student should look like, it focused on how students themselves understood what they did, who and what they engaged with, where engagement took place, and how these practices were shaped within the ordinary conditions of university life. The study was guided by two research questions: first, how students described their engagement; and second, what enablers and barriers shaped that engagement.

This focus was important because the literature does not provide a single stable understanding of student engagement. Much existing work has either been dominated by survey-based approaches or concentrated on more bounded classroom and platform settings. In both cases, there is a risk that engagement becomes too closely associated with visible, measurable, and institutionally recognisable forms of participation. This study therefore took a different route. It used a qualitative, single-site design to examine engagement as a day-to-day campus practice in one Chinese university, drawing on 40 undergraduate interviews and using sociomaterial and Foucauldian lenses as complementary analytic resources.

8.3 Summary of the Main Findings

The first main finding is that student engagement in this study was not a single, stable, or uniform condition. Students did not describe themselves as either engaged or disengaged in any simple sense. Their engagement was selective, uneven, and closely related to what they were engaging with. Time, attention, and effort were distributed across different people, spaces, tasks, and goals, and these investments were shaped by what students considered worthwhile, necessary, risky, or useful in particular situations. In this sense, engagement was not well captured by a general measure of participation. It was better understood as a situated and object-related practice.

The findings for Research Question 1 showed that engagement was organised across a wide campus ecology. Teachers were important, but engagement with them took different forms, including active participation, quiet attentiveness, strategic listening, limited contact outside class, and sometimes deliberate distance. Engagement with peers was also varied. It included academic cooperation, emotional support, everyday co-presence, and practical forms of companionship, but it was not always deep, stable, or solidaristic. Beyond these interpersonal relations, students also described important forms of engagement that were solitary, mediated, and non-human. Independent study, online searching, digital platforms, and AI were all part of how engagement was enacted in everyday university life. Engagement, then, was not confined to visible interaction with teachers or peers. It was distributed across people, technologies, spaces, and routines.

The findings for Research Question 2 showed that engagement was shaped by a set of conditions that did not operate as simple external enablers or barriers. Time pressure, evaluation, authority, peer norms, access to space, digital systems, emotional energy, and future-oriented competition all shaped what students could do and what they were willing to do. However, these conditions did not have fixed effects. The same arrangement could support one kind of engagement while narrowing another. Institutional structure could provide direction but also intensify pressure. Digital tools could widen access while also

fragmenting attention. Authority could offer support while also producing caution. In some cases, institutional expectations were not encountered in abstract form, but through everyday roles and relationships that transmitted pressure downwards and redirected students' attention towards what counted. The analysis therefore suggests that the language of enablers and barriers is too simple if it is treated as referring to stable positive or negative factors.

A further finding is that visibility and recognition mattered greatly. Across the study, some forms of engagement were more readily seen and valued than others. Practices such as speaking in class, attending organised activities, and participating in recognised schemes were easier to identify as engagement. By contrast, quiet concentration, private academic effort, selective withdrawal, solitary reflection, and practical forms of self-management were less easily recognised, even when they were central to students' everyday educational lives. This matters because it shows that engagement is not only about what students do. It is also about what institutions and others are able and willing to count as engagement.

The study also found that engagement in this setting was deeply shaped by evaluative arrangements. Many students distinguished between activities that were meaningful to them and activities that were useful because they counted towards grades, rankings, records, awards, or future opportunities. In this sense, engagement was often strategic as well as educational. It was tied not only to learning, but also to recognition, accumulation, comparison, and future competition. This does not mean that students were merely calculating or instrumental. Rather, it shows that engagement was organised within an environment in which institutional value and personal value did not always fully coincide. Under these conditions, engagement could become managed, calculated, quasi-commodified, and unevenly rewarded. It could function not only as educational activity, but also as something to be accumulated, displayed, exchanged for recognition, and converted into future advantage, while some students were better placed than others to take up these recognised forms of participation.

Taken together, these findings support the broader argument developed in Chapter 7: student engagement in this study is better understood as a contextual, relational, and interpretive phenomenon than as a universal benchmark. What this thesis called “Made-in-China” student engagement was not proposed as a fixed national essence. Rather, the term was used to show that engagement in this setting was assembled through a specific combination of institutional arrangements, evaluative systems, spatial and digital conditions, and students’ own practical responses to them.

8.4 Contributions of the Thesis

An empirical contribution of this thesis lies in the fine-grained account it provides of how Chinese undergraduates described and enacted engagement in everyday campus life. Much existing research has examined engagement through survey indicators, classroom participation, online behaviour, or other bounded settings. By contrast, this study followed engagement across a wider campus ecology. In doing so, it showed more clearly how engagement was organised not only through formal teaching, but also through dormitory life, peer relations, digital mediation, solitary study, institutional routines, and everyday judgements about value and effort.

The thesis also makes an analytic contribution by showing that the conditions shaping engagement are better understood as relational and context-dependent than as fixed enablers and barriers. While the language of enablers and barriers was retained in the research question because of its familiarity in the field, the analysis showed that these categories are too static if taken literally. The same condition may enable some forms of engagement while making others more difficult, thinner, or more strategic. This helps move the discussion beyond a simple positive-versus-negative model.

A third contribution is conceptual. The study treats student engagement as an interpretive object rather than as a settled benchmark. It argues that engagement cannot be reduced to visible participation, generic effort, or institutionally approved activity. Instead, it needs to be understood in relation to its object, its

context, and the conditions through which it is organised and recognised. This matters particularly in a field where engagement is often stabilised around what can be measured or seen.

There is also a methodological contribution. The thesis shows the value of a single-site, hermeneutic-phenomenological qualitative study for researching engagement as day-to-day campus practice. By maintaining site constancy while allowing variation across participants, the research was able to produce a more coherent and context-sensitive account of engagement than would have been possible through a more dispersed design. It also showed the usefulness of bringing sociomaterial and Foucauldian lenses together as sensitising resources for understanding both engagement as lived practice and the conditions through which it becomes visible, valued, and consequential.

Finally, the thesis contributes to how student engagement is known and produced as an object of research. Dominant approaches in the field have often stabilised engagement around visible, measurable, and institutionally convenient forms of evidence. In that process, quieter, more dispersed, and less legible practices can be pushed to the margins, even when they are central to students' everyday academic lives. By remaining close to students' accounts and by examining engagement across campus routines rather than through predefined indicators alone, this study points to the need for a more open and context-sensitive way of knowing engagement. In this sense, it contributes not only to what is said about engagement, but also to how engagement is produced as knowledge.

8.5 Implications of the Study

One implication of this study is that student engagement research needs to be cautious about equating engagement with visibility. Practices that are public, verbal, measurable, and easy to document are not necessarily more meaningful than practices that are quiet, private, or difficult to observe. If engagement is understood too narrowly through what institutions can easily recognise, important parts of students' educational lives risk being overlooked.

A second implication is that research on student engagement in Chinese higher education needs to move beyond two familiar tendencies: the uncritical use of imported indicator-based frameworks, and broad cultural explanations of Chinese students. The findings suggest that neither approach is sufficient on its own. What matters is how engagement is organised within specific institutional, evaluative, spatial, and digital conditions, and how students respond to these in practice.

There are also implications for universities. If institutions want to understand student engagement more fully, they need to look beyond participation counts, performance indicators, and highly visible forms of activity. They also need to consider how their own systems shape what becomes worth doing, what gets recorded, and what remains unrecognised. The findings suggest that the organisation of engagement is closely tied to wider questions of recognition, pressure, access, value, and the quasi-commodification of participation.

8.6 Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in one university. This was a deliberate choice, because the aim was to develop a fine-grained and context-sensitive account of engagement within a relatively coherent institutional setting. However, the findings should not be read as representative of all Chinese universities or all Chinese undergraduates.

Second, the study relied on interview data. Interviews were well suited to exploring how students understood and described their engagement, but they do not provide direct access to all dimensions of practice. Some forms of engagement may have been easier to articulate than others, especially those that were more memorable, more conscious, or more easily narrated.

Third, the study focused on undergraduates. This made sense given the campus-based organisation of undergraduate life and the aims of the thesis, but it means that the findings cannot simply be extended to postgraduate students or to other higher education groups with different routines and conditions.

Fourth, the study moved between Chinese-language data and English-language writing. Although care was taken in transcription, coding, translation, and the standardisation of key terms, some nuance inevitably becomes harder to retain when accounts are interpreted across languages.

8.7 Future Research and Final Reflections

Several directions for future research follow from this study. One is comparative work across different types of Chinese higher education institutions. Such studies could examine how far the patterns identified here also appear in universities with different regional locations, institutional statuses, governance arrangements, or student compositions.

Another direction would be to use longitudinal or multi-method designs. Following students over time could show more clearly how engagement shifts across different stages of university life. Combining interviews with observation, diaries, or digital methods could also help capture aspects of everyday engagement that are less easily expressed in retrospective interviews.

A third direction concerns the role of digital systems and AI. This thesis showed that digital platforms and AI were already part of students' everyday engagement. Given how quickly these technologies are changing, further research is needed on how they reshape study practices, recognition, dependency, inequality, and the practical organisation of academic life.

Finally, more work is needed on the politics of recognition in student engagement. This includes questions about which forms of engagement are most easily seen and rewarded, which remain marginal or invisible, and how institutional systems may reproduce unequal access to recognised forms of participation.

Overall, the thesis has argued that student engagement should not be treated as a self-evident or uniform category. In the accounts of the students in this study, engagement was selective, uneven, and shaped by context. It was organised through relations among people, spaces, technologies, routines, and evaluative arrangements. For this reason, engagement is better understood here not as a

fixed benchmark, but as a contextual and interpretive object. The contribution of the thesis lies not in offering a final definition of engagement, but in showing why engagement needs to be understood through practice, conditions, and context. It also suggests that the question is not only whether students participate, but what kinds of participation are recognised, rewarded, and made valuable within university life.

Appendix One

Participant information sheet

Research Title: An exploration of Chinese undergraduates' learning engagement on campus

I am a PhD student at Lancaster University, and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study which aims to investigate undergraduates' learning engagement on campus.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?

This study aims to explore in what ways do students describe their engagement with learning, which consists of who and where do students engage with, what forms does the engagement take, and what motivates their engagement? Meanwhile, the enablers and barriers of student engagement will also be discussed in this study.

Why have I been invited?

I have approached you because I am interested in understanding Chinese undergraduate engagement on campus. Due to the geographical location and comprehensive subject area of Xi'an Jiaotong University (XJTU), undergraduates' learning experience at XJTU will provide rich information in this research topic. I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you decided to take part, this would involve the following:

First, I would like you to read and sign the consent form of this study.

Then, you are suggested to take photos of the spaces (both online and offline) you usually selected to study and to socialise with others on campus before the interview.

After that, we will have an interview using voice call, and audio recording will take place. This interview will last about one hour.

Later, you could send more photos of your study and social spaces (both online and offline) on campus.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?

Taking part in this study will allow you to share your experiences on campus, and it will give participants an opportunity to have a reflection of their studying and socialising activities in their life. By doing so, they may find some information they

ignored before, and they could have more thoughts to improve their learning effectiveness and happiness on campus.

Do I have to take part?

No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 1 week after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The only possible disadvantage is that the researcher will ask you some questions related to your use of time and space on campus, and how your communication and interaction with others, in the interview, which may bring some discomfort to you. However, it is essential to notice that the interview does not aim to judge or criticise your behaviour, but to understand how you spend your time online and offline and what factors contribute to your engagement with others on campus.

Will my data be identifiable?

After the interview, only me and my supervisor, the researchers conducting this study will have access to the ideas you share with me.

We will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is we will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

We will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways: We will use it for research purposes only. This will include journal articles and my PhD thesis. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you) and photos you send me, so that although I will use

your exact words or photos, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in our publications.

How my data will be stored

Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself or my supervisor.

Yuhong Lei y.lei4@lancaster.ac.uk 07446181889
Educational Research County South Lancaster University LA1 4YD

Jan McArthur j.mcarthur@lancaster.ac.uk
Educational Research, County South, Lancaster University LA1 4YD

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact:
Brett Bligh b.bligh@lancaster.ac.uk
Educational Research, County South, Lancaster University LA1 4YD

Sources of support

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Appendix Two

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: An exploration of Chinese undergraduates' learning engagement on campus

Name of Researchers: Yuhong Lei

Email: y.lei4@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 1 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 6 weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed. If I am involved in focus groups and then withdraw my data will remain part of the study.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. PLEASE NOTE: if you intend to make your data available to future researchers via a data archive, you need to add a sentence to point 4 or add a separate point to request consent for this. You could say: Anonymised data will be offered to Yuhong Lei and will be made available to genuine research for re-use (secondary analysis)	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed, and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Appendix Three

Interview Questions

Before starting the interview, I would like to make sure that you already read the Participant Information Sheet I sent to you. Also, you received the Consent form and typed identification information and sent back to me by yourself.

1. Basic warm-up questions

Name	
Gender	
Age	
Year	
Were you a science student or liberal arts students when you took university entrance examination?	
Are you a local?	
Where are you from?	
Are you a single child?	
Why did you select this university?	
Why did you select this subject?	
Are you living in the university's accommodation?	
How about weekends? Do you still live on campus?	

2. Could you talk me through a typical day at XJTU?

For example, what do you usually do? At where? With whom?

(From this question, I want to know who does participants engage with, and what engagement do

they have? Both academic and social engagement).

3. Where do you usually study on campus? Why do you select these places?

4. Have you changed your preferred study places on campus? Why?

5. Do you prefer study alone or with others? Why? Where do you usually study?

6. In your opinion, where does the learning take place, both formal and informal learning? How long and how many efforts do you put on your learning?

7. How do you feel about your learning here? Are you happy? Is everything comfortable?

8. How does online learning plays a role in your life on campus? (such as university's own platform, public resources like MOOCs)

9. According to the answer of Q2, I will ask more details about the engagement

9.1 Could you tell me more about how your 'teachers/peers/roommates/and other roles that participants mentioned in the interview', plays a role in your life? (both online and offline)

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