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Original Article

Exploring Student Engagement in Large Undergraduate Classes from Student Perspectives: A Case Study of Makerere University

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In the context of massification and globalisation, student engagement in large classrooms at public universities in Uganda has become a significant challenge. This study aims to explore university students' perceptions of their engagement with classroom activities, focusing on how lecturer planning, teaching methods, and evaluation practices influence their involvement and academic success. Using qualitative methods, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with students at a public university. The findings revealed that students face significant barriers to engagement, primarily due to passive teaching methods, overcrowded classrooms, and limited interaction with lecturers. Students perceived that traditional lecture-based approaches and insufficient formative assessments hindered their participation, while infrastructural constraints worsened disengagement. The study recommends that lecturers adopt more student-centred, active learning strategies, while university management should invest in infrastructure and technological tools to support interactive learning. The Ministry of Education and the National Council for Higher Education should implement policies that foster innovative teaching practices and provide adequate support systems for students. Future research should investigate the long-term impact of these interventions and explore how technology may shape student engagement in large classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of higher education, the concept of student engagement has gained substantial attention as a pivotal determinant of academic success, retention, and overall satisfaction among students. Traditionally defined as the level of participation, motivation, and emotional investment students exhibit in their educational pursuits (Kuh, 2009; Rabboun et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2019), student engagement encompasses a multifaceted construct that is critical in understanding the dynamics of the learning environment. Recent studies have underscored the significance of student engagement in various contexts, particularly in large classroom settings, where conventional pedagogical strategies often fall short of fostering meaningful interactions (Rissanen, 2018; Peters et al., 2019). Research has consistently demonstrated that student engagement is intricately linked to academic outcomes, such as grades and attendance (Subramanian & Mahmoud, 2020; Zhou et al., 2019). For instance, in large introductory courses, engagement strategies are not merely beneficial but essential for enhancing student performance and experiences (Rissanen, 2018). This assertion is further supported by evidence that highlights the necessity of evaluating engagement strategies, even in already engaged classrooms, to ensure that all students are actively involved in their learning processes (Peters et al., 2019). Despite the growing body of literature on student engagement, a critical gap persists in understanding the phenomenon from the student perspective, particularly in higher education environments. Much of the research has focused on institutional metrics and faculty strategies, which, while valuable, may overlook the experiences and perceptions of students themselves (Tight, 2020; Groccia, 2018). This oversight poses challenges for educators and policymakers seeking to implement effective engagement practices that resonate with actual student needs and preferences.

Studies indicate that student perceptions of engagement are influenced by a variety of factors,

including teacher support, classroom dynamics, and the nature of instructional methods employed (Amerstorfer, & Freiin von Münster-Kistner, 2021; Xerri et al., 2018; Prananto et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2019). Moreover, existing frameworks that attempt to quantify engagement often fail to capture the subjective nature of the experience, underscoring the need for a deeper exploration into how students themselves define and experience engagement within their academic journey. As such, this article aims to bridge this gap by adopting a student-centred lens through which the significance of engagement in higher education is examined. By prioritizing student perspectives, educators can gain insights into not only the effectiveness of current pedagogical practices but also the perceptions and expectations students have regarding their participation and success in large classroom settings. Practically, this approach strives to inform the development of tailored engagement strategies that enhance the learning experience, foster student retention, and improve academic outcomes in higher education.

The concept of "*student engagement*" is deeply rooted in educational theory, though its explicit use and systematic exploration in the context of large undergraduate classes emerged more recently. The term "engagement" is derived from the Latin word *engagere*, meaning "to bind or pledge," which in the educational context evolved to signify the active involvement of students in their learning processes (Astin, 1984). Initially, the notion of student engagement was used interchangeably with terms such as "student participation" or "student involvement," and it was not until the late 20th century that it began to be widely recognized as a construct integral to student success, particularly in larger educational settings (Kuh, 2003; Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Ashwin, 2024). The academic exploration of student engagement can be traced back to early educational theorists like Dewey (1916), who emphasized the importance of active participation in learning, and Vygotsky (1978), whose work on social learning environments underscored the value of student interaction in cognitive development. However, it was Astin's (1984)

seminal work on student involvement that provided a foundational theoretical framework defining student engagement as the energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities. This development set the stage for future studies into engagement, especially within large university classrooms where direct interaction between students and instructors is often limited. The growth of large class sizes in higher education has become one of the defining trends in university teaching globally over the past few decades. This shift is primarily attributed to increasing enrollment rates and the rise of cost-effective, scalable teaching models (Bennett & Kane, 2014). As universities began to accommodate more students, the need for lecture-style instruction to manage large groups of learners became more prevalent. Large class sizes, while efficient from a logistical perspective, present significant challenges to fostering deep student engagement (Biggs, 2003).

One of the earliest studies to specifically address engagement in large classes was conducted by Chickering and Gamson (1987), who introduced the "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education." These principles highlighted the importance of active learning, interaction, and prompt feedback which were elements essential for engagement in large classes. Their work catalyzed further interest in how to adapt engagement strategies to the realities of large classrooms, where the traditional one-on-one instructor-student interaction was often limited. The early 2000s saw the emergence of active learning as a pedagogical response to the challenges of large classes. Researchers such as Bonwell and Eison (1991) argued that students' active involvement in the learning process, not just passive listening, was a key factor in fostering engagement. This shift away from lecture-based teaching towards interactive methods such as group work, problem-based learning, and technology-driven instruction became a critical trend in efforts to sustain engagement in large classes (Freeman et al., 2014). The advent of digital tools, such as online discussion forums, real-time polling, and digital collaborative spaces,

further reinforced the shift toward active learning, allowing students to engage with course material and peers outside the physical classroom (Chen & Chang, 2021).

Over the last few decades, a range of seminal studies have highlighted the complexity of student engagement in large classes. Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement remains one of the most influential frameworks, emphasizing the connection between student engagement and academic success. According to Astin, the more students are involved in educationally purposeful activities, the more likely they are to experience positive outcomes in terms of learning, persistence, and retention. While his work was groundbreaking in emphasizing the role of student engagement in academic performance, it was also recognized that large classes, by nature, limit the opportunities for individual student involvement (Kuh, 2009). Student engagement has been conceptualized as cognitive, behavioural and emotional (Balwant, 2018; Tai, 2020; Tight, 2020; Torres 2024). This study moves in the same direction but with a keen interest in the context of larger classes having more than 70 students for teaching at a public university in Uganda.

More recent contributions by Kuh et al. (2010) expanded the scope of engagement beyond just classroom activities to include co-curricular and institutional practices. This broader perspective underscored the importance of creating a holistic environment that supports engagement in large class settings. Kuh's work laid the groundwork for understanding how engagement in large classrooms can be influenced by institutional policies, teaching strategies, and the broader campus culture. A more focused look at the challenges of engagement in large classes came from studies by Eiszler (2009) and Dallimore et al. (2012), who investigated how student involvement varies depending on teaching practices, student attitudes, and class structures. Their studies found that while large classes present a unique set of challenges, strategies such as formative assessment, group collaboration, and the use of multimedia can promote engagement and improve learning outcomes. The past decade

has seen a rapid shift toward hybrid and online learning environments, further complicating the dynamics of student engagement in large classes. Studies have shown that technology can significantly enhance engagement by facilitating more interaction and personalized learning (Garrison et al., 2010). The use of Learning Management Systems (LMS) and video conferencing tools has allowed for greater flexibility in course design, where large groups can engage in synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. However, the effectiveness of these tools in fostering engagement is contingent upon the intentional design of the learning experience.

Research by Glover et al. (2023) and Chen and Chang (2021) suggests that while technology can facilitate engagement, it requires careful implementation to ensure that it does not merely replicate passive learning. The shift toward student-centered pedagogy, focusing on the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, remains central to the ongoing discourse on engagement in large university classrooms. In summary, the historical trajectory of student engagement in large classes reflects an evolving understanding of how to maintain student involvement in increasingly impersonal and large-scale educational environments. From its early conceptualization in the work of Dewey and Vygotsky to contemporary research on active learning and digital engagement, the field has continuously adapted to the changing landscape of higher education. As enrollment numbers rise and class sizes expand, the need to develop more inclusive and effective strategies to engage students in large classrooms will remain a critical area for future research and practice.

The intersection of globalization and internationalization has significantly influenced student engagement within large undergraduate classes, particularly in Western, European, and Asian universities. Globalization has led to an increase in student mobility, with institutions worldwide adopting strategies to enhance the international appeal of their programs. In Hong Kong, for example, universities have balanced

Western educational models with China's broader integration goals (Pan, 2021). This globalization-driven diversity has shaped the academic environment, prompting universities to adapt their pedagogies to effectively engage students from varying cultural backgrounds. As global competition intensifies, fostering student engagement in large classes becomes an essential priority, with institutions recognizing that engagement can drive academic success and retention (Tight, 2020). The shift towards more diverse student populations has underscored the importance of providing inclusive and flexible learning environments, where students feel both challenged and supported, thus enhancing their academic involvement (Marginson, 2019).

In European universities, the internationalisation of higher education has spurred a transformation in teaching strategies, particularly in large class settings. The influx of international students has prompted institutions to modify curricula to ensure that they reflect global perspectives while fostering active participation (Tight, 2020). This shift towards a more inclusive approach to student engagement emphasizes the need for pedagogies that bridge cultural differences and integrate global learning experiences. For instance, research by Marginson (2021) highlights how institutions are increasingly leveraging collaborative learning environments, where students from diverse backgrounds engage in meaningful discussions and co-create knowledge. These strategies help overcome the traditional barriers to engagement found in large classes, which often suffer from passive learning environments. Marginson (2021) further notes that universities are also using technology to enhance this engagement, with platforms that allow for real-time collaboration and feedback, creating a more participatory experience for students.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the adoption of digital learning platforms, which have had a significant impact on student engagement in large classes globally. In Hong Kong, the transition to online and hybrid learning environments has contributed to the creation of

"virtually trans-local identities," where students are exposed to a wider array of international perspectives and academic practices through technology (Chung, 2021). This digital transformation has not only provided students with more flexible opportunities for participation but also allowed for more extensive interaction with international peers, thereby enhancing the global learning experience. However, challenges such as technological disparities and the need for cultural adaptation remain. As Marginson (2020) argues, universities must ensure that their pedagogical strategies are both globally informed and locally relevant to foster meaningful engagement in large classrooms. Furthermore, the ability to blend technology with culturally sensitive teaching methods will be key to addressing the complexities of engaging diverse student populations, particularly in large, lecture-based classes (Tight, 2020).

Across African public universities, student engagement in large classes is a persistent challenge, often compounded by infrastructural limitations, pedagogical rigidity, and resource constraints. The expansion of higher education has created an environment where lecture halls are overcrowded, lecturers are overstretched, and learners are left to navigate impersonal, didactic instructional settings. Recent evidence from Uganda underscores how institutional environments and inadequate facilities directly impact students' participation in learning activities (Akategeka & Sekiwu, 2020). In such contexts, student engagement, especially cognitive and emotional dimensions—is often sacrificed for procedural efficiency, resulting in passive learning and diminished motivation (Nathaniel, Kani, & Barabra, 2023). Although large classes can promote certain social aspects of learning, their structure tends to undermine deeper forms of academic engagement, particularly when pedagogical practices remain transmissive rather than interactive.

Ugandan public universities, such as Makerere University, exhibit these systemic patterns, where limited teaching infrastructure, minimal use of technology, and rigid lecture-based formats

hinder student-centred learning (Akategeka & Sekiwu, 2020). While efforts to reform pedagogy are underway in some institutions, implementation remains inconsistent and under-researched. For instance, Mugizi et al (2021) highlight the positive correlation between student-centred approaches and engagement in smaller private universities, suggesting the need for scalable, context-sensitive strategies that can be adapted in public institutions. Moreover, the voices of student teachers themselves indicate that their engagement in large undergraduate classes is often superficial and constrained by the lack of interaction, time, and feedback (Nathaniel et al., 2023). Collectively, these insights point to the urgency of rethinking instructional design, faculty development, and infrastructural investment to improve student engagement in Uganda's large-class higher education settings.

Problem Statement

Student engagement is a cornerstone of effective teaching and learning in higher education, fostering critical thinking, motivation, and academic success. Ideally, university classrooms should promote active participation, timely feedback, and meaningful student-instructor interaction. However, at Makerere University, large class sizes, particularly in undergraduate programmes (Mak CEES Annual Report, 2023), have become the norm, often exceeding the capacity of lecture halls and straining available resources coupled with high lecturer-to-student ratios. This phenomenon is common knowledge in most public universities in Uganda (NCHE Report, 2022: pgs 37, 41) as there were 107 students to one PhD holder irrespective of professional area of specialisation. This overcrowding is linked to reduced student engagement, limited opportunities for feedback, poor development of critical thinking skills, and low academic motivation and confidence among learners. Although large class teaching does not inherently lead to disengagement, the persistent use of traditional teaching methods, inadequate assessment approaches, and minimal feedback further compound the problem. Without strategic

intervention, this situation may result in declining academic performance and a mismatch between graduate skills and high levels of competencies demanded by the labour market affecting graduates' employability. This troubling reality warrants a focused investigation into student engagement in large classes at Makerere University to inform more responsive and innovative teaching practices.

Objective of the Study

To explore university students' perceptions of their engagement with classroom activities in large class settings, focusing on factors influencing their involvement and academic success.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Astin's Theory of Student Engagement

Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement has long been recognized as a foundational framework for understanding how students engage with their educational environment. Astin argues that student involvement, defined as the physical and psychological energy students invest in their academic activities, is a critical determinant of their academic success, persistence, and overall satisfaction with the higher education experience. The theory posits that the more involved students are, the more likely they are to achieve positive academic outcomes (Astin, 1984). In the context of large university classes, however, Astin's theory requires adaptation and consideration of the specific challenges posed by the large-class setting, such as limited student-instructor interaction and potential disengagement due to the impersonal nature of the environment (Bennett & Kane, 2014). These factors highlight the importance of designing teaching and learning experiences that promote higher levels of student involvement in large class settings, a challenge that requires both institutional and pedagogical adjustments. Recent studies have continued to investigate these challenges, underscoring the need for innovative strategies in large classrooms

to foster engagement (Jones et al., 2021; Kahu, 2020).

Several studies have applied Astin's theory to understand student engagement in large classes, revealing the complex relationship between class size and involvement. For instance, Allen et al. (2013) emphasize that while large classes may limit direct interaction with instructors, they can still foster student involvement through active learning strategies such as group discussions, peer teaching, and collaborative assignments. Such approaches align with Astin's principle that involvement can take many forms, not just face-to-face interaction with instructors, but also through meaningful interactions with peers and course content (Astin, 1984). In large classes, the challenge becomes providing structured opportunities for students to engage both cognitively and socially. The integration of technology, such as online forums and virtual study groups, has been identified as an effective means of overcoming some of the physical barriers to involvement (Chen & Chang, 2021). These methods help bridge the gap between students and instructors, fostering a more inclusive and participatory learning environment despite the constraints of large class sizes. Recent systematic reviews on student engagement in higher education have also emphasized the importance of active learning and technology use, highlighting the positive impact on student outcomes (Glover et al., 2023).

The importance of institutional support in facilitating student engagement in large classes is another critical aspect of Astin's theory. Astin (1984) highlights the role of the institution in providing environments that encourage involvement. For large universities, this can mean not only restructuring course delivery but also enhancing support services that cater to students' academic, social, and personal needs. Research by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) underscores that institutions that actively promote student involvement through extracurricular activities, academic support services, and an inclusive campus climate experience higher levels of student engagement and retention. In the context

of large classes, the university's role in fostering a supportive environment becomes even more crucial, as students may feel disconnected or overwhelmed. This suggests that, in addition to active teaching strategies, universities need to invest in creating an environment where students feel valued and included, thus encouraging them to invest their energy in the educational process (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Recent studies have reiterated this point, suggesting that institutional strategies designed to reduce isolation in large classes, such as mentorship programs and peer-assisted learning, can significantly improve student engagement (Meyer & Sriram, 2022; Kahu, 2020).

Finally, while Astin's theory provides a strong framework for understanding student engagement, its application to large classes in universities requires a nuanced understanding of how different students experience involvement. As Tinto (1993) notes, student engagement is not uniform across all demographic groups, with students from underrepresented backgrounds often facing additional barriers to involvement. Astin's theory assumes a level of equal opportunity for all students to engage, but in practice, large class settings often exacerbate existing inequalities, limiting opportunities for marginalized students to participate. Researchers such as Harper and Quaye (2009) argue that student engagement in large classes can be influenced by factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and prior academic preparation, which must be addressed through targeted interventions. Therefore, while Astin's framework remains highly applicable, it requires adaptation to address the diverse needs of all students and ensure that engagement is promoted equitably across different student populations. Recent systematic reviews have also highlighted the disparities in student engagement in large classes and the importance of creating inclusive and equitable learning environments to foster engagement for all students (Baker et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Systematic Literature Review (Rizwan, Nee, & Garfan, 2025) explored the key factors affecting student engagement and academic performance in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). By leveraging deep learning techniques, the study aims to predict student success and identify strategies that can improve engagement. The review found that factors such as interactive content, peer communication, and timely feedback were essential for fostering higher engagement in MOOCs. Additionally, predictive models demonstrated that early engagement in a course was strongly correlated with higher completion rates. The study recommends incorporating adaptive learning technologies, enhancing peer interaction mechanisms, and offering personalized feedback to support both engagement and performance in online learning environments.

De Grandi, Mochrie, & Ramos (2019), explored effective teaching strategies for engaging students in large classroom settings, particularly in introductory courses. The review highlights the importance of active learning techniques, such as group discussions, peer teaching, and problem-solving activities, in boosting student engagement. Faculty-led mentorship programs and the use of technology were also identified as key factors in fostering meaningful student interactions. The study emphasizes that large classes do not necessarily have to result in disengaged students; rather, creative pedagogical strategies, including collaborative learning and digital tools, can effectively maintain high levels of engagement.

Sulimani & Howard, (2025) examined the role of communication strategies in enhancing student engagement with surveys, specifically the National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK. The findings suggest that effective communication channels, such as email, SMS, and digital platforms—play a crucial role in increasing student participation in surveys. Additionally, when students receive feedback about the impact of their responses, their motivation to engage

further in academic activities is strengthened. The study recommends that universities adopt multifaceted communication strategies to keep students informed and engaged, ensuring that they can see the tangible effects of their feedback on course design and teaching methods.

Vieno-Corbett & Deweyert (2025), explored how student engagement can be fostered in large classes, using an undergraduate histology course as a case study. The review emphasizes that incorporating varied assessment techniques, such as interactive assignments and digital quizzes, can significantly improve engagement and learning outcomes. Additionally, peer discussions and group projects were found to be effective in maintaining motivation and fostering collaborative learning throughout the course. The authors recommend the continued use of interactive learning strategies and the development of flexible, student-centred assessments that can sustain engagement, especially in large, content-heavy courses. These studies collectively highlight a range of strategies to enhance student engagement in large classes, including the use of active learning, peer collaboration, digital tools, and effective communication. They underlined the importance of adapting pedagogical approaches to create inclusive, interactive, and engaging learning environments, even in large-scale educational settings.

Spitzig and Renner (2025) examined the relationship between student engagement and retention among adult learners in community colleges. This study explores whether higher levels of engagement, as measured by the five benchmarks of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), increase the likelihood of adult learners' intent to re-enroll and persist in their studies. The authors found that active engagement, including participation in class discussions, collaborative learning, and faculty-student interactions, significantly contributed to students' intent to continue their education. They concluded that student engagement is a critical factor in enhancing retention rates for adult learners, highlighting that

engagement goes beyond academic activities and includes a sense of community and support within the institution. The research methods employed in this study included quantitative analysis, utilizing CCSSE data to assess engagement benchmarks and correlate these with retention rates. The study's findings underscore the importance of creating engaging learning environments that cater specifically to the needs of adult learners, such as offering flexible scheduling and support services. The article recommends that community colleges invest in strategies that promote student engagement, such as providing mentoring programs, facilitating peer interactions, and fostering a supportive classroom environment. By doing so, institutions can not only enhance engagement but also improve retention rates among adult learners, who often face unique challenges balancing education with other life responsibilities.

Saadati et al. (2025) explore student engagement in medical universities across Iran through a comprehensive national study. The study aims to understand how engagement is perceived and implemented in medical education, focusing on various factors that influence student participation and learning outcomes. The findings highlight that student engagement is a critical quality measure for assessing educational success in medical universities, as engaged students are more likely to exhibit better academic performance, higher levels of motivation, and stronger professional competencies. The study identifies key factors contributing to student engagement, including faculty support, peer collaboration, and the availability of resources such as simulation labs and clinical experiences. The authors argue that fostering engagement in medical education requires not only interactive teaching methods but also institutional support systems that enhance students' academic and personal development.

The research utilized qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and focus groups, to gather insights from medical students, faculty, and administrators. The results show that active learning strategies, such as case-based

discussions, practical labs, and problem-solving exercises, significantly enhance student engagement. Additionally, creating an inclusive academic environment where students feel supported both academically and emotionally was found to be a crucial factor in sustaining engagement throughout the challenging medical curriculum. The study recommends that medical universities prioritize the development of engaging pedagogical practices and institutional structures that support student well-being, as these are integral to improving student engagement and, ultimately, educational outcomes.

Tian et al, (2020) focus on the engagement of international undergraduate students in China, exploring how student engagement impacts the sustainability of international education programs. The study emphasizes the growing importance of international students to China's higher education system and investigates the engagement strategies employed by universities to enhance the academic and social experiences of international students. Findings show that fostering cross-cultural interaction, providing tailored academic support, and creating opportunities for international students to engage with local students was essential in maintaining high levels of engagement. The study highlights that engagement, when aligned with students' academic and cultural needs, leads to improved retention rates and greater satisfaction among international students. Tian et al. (2020) used a qualitative research approach that included surveys and focus groups with international students across multiple Chinese universities. The study's recommendations include the integration of cultural exchange programs, mentorship opportunities, and the use of technology to support academic engagement. The authors stress that universities should ensure international students have a sense of belonging and are encouraged to participate actively in both academic and extracurricular activities. These strategies not only improve student engagement but also contribute to the overall sustainability of international education in China.

Strong (2024) investigates the factors that influence student engagement in a specific academic department, the School of Politics and International Relations at Queen Mary University of London. This qualitative study aims to uncover the key drivers of student engagement within this discipline, considering both academic and social factors. The primary finding of the research was that student engagement is significantly shaped by both the nature of the course content and the level of faculty-student interaction. Strong argues that engagement is not just about attendance or participation in formal activities but is deeply connected to the relevance of the subject matter to students' personal interests and future aspirations, as well as the quality of relationships formed with faculty and peers. The study also highlights the importance of interactive learning environments, where students feel valued and supported, in fostering deeper engagement in their academic journey.

The study used qualitative research methods, including interviews and focus groups with students and faculty members. These findings point to several key drivers of engagement, such as the quality of teaching, opportunities for student autonomy, and the availability of resources that encourage both academic success and social interaction. Strong recommends that departments and universities adopt more student-centered teaching approaches, integrating active learning techniques, and creating opportunities for students to engage in discussions that connect academic theories to real-world political issues. The research also suggests the importance of fostering a sense of belonging, which is crucial for maintaining high levels of engagement, especially in competitive and demanding disciplines like politics and international relations.

In contrast, Sá (2023) examines the role of both academic and social engagement in improving student retention and persistence in higher education, focusing on Portuguese universities. The study emphasizes the critical importance of engaging students not only in their academic studies but also in extracurricular activities and social networks within the university community.

Sá's findings suggest that students who are socially and academically engaged are more likely to remain in their programs and continue their education. This engagement is particularly important for first-year students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as it helps them navigate the social and academic demands of university life. Sá's research employed a qualitative methodology, analyzing data from focus groups and interviews with students across several Portuguese institutions. The study revealed that academic engagement, including participation in class discussions and completing assignments with a sense of purpose, was crucial for developing academic skills and maintaining motivation. Social engagement, such as joining student organizations and participating in extracurricular activities, was found to foster a sense of community and belonging, which in turn contributed to higher retention rates. The study's recommendations include creating supportive environments that encourage both academic and social engagement, offering mentorship programs, and ensuring that students are equipped with the resources necessary to succeed in both areas. Sá concludes that integrating academic and social engagement strategies is a key lever for improving student retention and persistence in higher education.

While the articles reviewed provided valuable insights into student engagement in both specialized disciplines and broader academic contexts, notable gaps warranted further investigation. Strong's (2024) study focused on the drivers of student engagement within the School of Politics and International Relations but did not delve deeply into the intersectionality of factors such as cultural background, socioeconomic status, or the impact of digital learning environments, which could also have influenced engagement in a globalized educational context. Similarly, while the study emphasized faculty-student relationships and interactive learning, it overlooked the potential role of institutional support structures, such as academic advising and career services, which could have been critical in shaping long-term

engagement and retention, particularly for underrepresented groups. On the other hand, Sá's (2023) research highlighted both academic and social engagement as key to improving student retention, yet it predominantly focused on the Portuguese context and did not explore how different academic disciplines or institutional types might have influenced the specific engagement strategies required. Additionally, while Sá acknowledged the importance of extracurricular activities, the study did not adequately address how the growing reliance on digital platforms and virtual engagement, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, had transformed student engagement, particularly for students in remote or hybrid learning environments. A more comprehensive understanding of engagement could have emerged from integrating these often-overlooked factors, as well as exploring the potential for digital and hybrid models to foster engagement across diverse student populations.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design, which is particularly suited for exploring the complex, context-specific nature of student engagement within higher education. The research is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which posits that knowledge is socially constructed through interactions and experiences (Creswell, 2013). The aim of this research was to understand how students perceive their engagement in large university classes and the factors that shape their experiences. A constructivist approach allowed for the exploration of students' subjective interpretations, focusing on how they make meaning of their educational experiences through in-depth, reflective conversations. The population for this study consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in a large university in Uganda. This population was selected because of the increasing class sizes in higher education institutions in the country and the related challenges to student engagement. The sample for the case study was purposefully selected, ensuring that it included students with diverse backgrounds, experiences,

and levels of engagement. This approach helps to capture a comprehensive range of perspectives on the topic of student engagement, particularly in large classes, which often present unique barriers to effective engagement. A sample size of 10 students was chosen, as qualitative studies tend to focus on in-depth exploration of experiences rather than broad generalization (Patton, 2015). This sample size was considered optimal for case study research, allowing for sufficient data saturation and ensuring that the complexity of the students' engagement experiences is well-represented. The sample was drawn to include students from various academic disciplines (Arts and Science – based disciplines) based on Biglan's 1973 classification of basic, pure, and applied and used recent Stocker (1993) classification of hard-applied-nonlife and soft-applied-life respectively, within the university to ensure a rich and varied data set, providing a holistic view of engagement in large classrooms.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions, which are well-suited to exploring the nuanced, personal experiences of participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow for flexibility in addressing individual experiences while maintaining focus on key themes such as student engagement, teaching practices, and institutional support. The interviews were designed to elicit students' perspectives on how they engage with course material, faculty, and peers, and what factors influence their engagement, particularly in the context of large classes. Focus groups were also used to encourage interaction among participants, providing an opportunity for students to compare their experiences and discuss common challenges and strategies for enhancing engagement. Focus groups were facilitated using open-ended questions, allowing students to reflect on their experiences collectively while ensuring that all voices were heard.

Data Analysis

Data from the interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis allowed for a detailed exploration of the recurring themes in students' responses regarding their engagement experiences. Data were coded inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed by pre-existing categories. This approach ensures that the findings are grounded in the participants' experiences and that the analysis remains open to new insights (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To ensure the validity of the study: *Confirmability* was addressed by maintaining a clear audit trail, ensuring that the findings reflect participants' views rather than the researcher's biases. Detailed field notes and interview transcripts were kept throughout the data collection and analysis process to ensure transparency and consistency in how the data were interpreted. *Transferability* was achieved by providing rich, thick descriptions of the context, participants, and findings, enabling readers to assess whether the findings might apply to other similar settings or populations (Creswell, 2013, (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).). While the study is focused on a specific university in Uganda, the insights gained may be relevant to other large classrooms within comparable educational contexts. *Dependability* was ensured by conducting member checks, where participants were given the opportunity to review and comment on the transcriptions and initial interpretations of their interviews. This helps ensure that the findings accurately reflect participants' perspectives and experiences. Additionally, triangulation of data sources, using both individual interviews and focus group discussions was used to enhance the credibility and richness of the findings, allowing for a deeper understanding of the participants' engagement experiences.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the study's purpose and their right to confidentiality and voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured that their responses would be anonymized and used solely for research purposes. Participants were also given the option to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. By using a constructivist paradigm, the study captured the subjective, personal experiences of students, contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors that influence their engagement.

FINDINGS

Findings from the interviews and focus group discussions revealed that students' engagement in large classroom settings is significantly influenced by how lecturers plan and deliver content. Most students expressed a desire for structured, purposeful lessons that reflect thoughtful preparation. One third-year student explained,

"You can tell when a lecturer has planned...there's flow and logic, and it makes it easier to stay focused. But when they just read from slides, we zone out."

Several participants echoed this sentiment, suggesting that effective planning not only improves comprehension but also creates a sense of academic seriousness that motivates engagement. Students particularly appreciated when lecturers provided lecture outlines or shared objectives at the beginning of the session, indicating that clarity in structure was linked to sustained attention.

Concerning teaching methods, participants expressed a strong preference for interactive strategies over traditional lecture-based approaches. Large classes, they noted, often default to monologic teaching, leaving limited room for discussion or student input. A student AA from the Faculty of Social Sciences observed,

"Most times, we're just listening. There's no room to ask questions or even reflect. It feels

like we're not part of the learning process." Others mentioned that even simple strategies such as think-pair-share, use of student response systems, or in-class debates made them feel "seen" and "intellectually alive."

However, such approaches were described as rare, with one student BB stating,

"Only a few lecturers try to involve us and you can see the difference in class energy when they do."

These findings suggest that students equate active participation with deeper learning, yet perceive it as contingent on the lecturer's pedagogical choices.

Evaluation practices also emerged as a key factor influencing student engagement and academic motivation. Many participants highlighted that formative assessment opportunities, such as quizzes, short reflections, or feedback on assignments, were often missing or inconsistently applied in large classes. Participant CC

"Sometimes we go through the whole semester without knowing if we're on the right track," one education student lamented."

Another student DD remarked,

"Lecturers focus on exams only. But if you don't get feedback along the way, how can you improve or stay engaged?"

This lack of continuous feedback was seen not only as a barrier to academic success but also as a signal of disconnection between lecturers and learners. Students called for a more formative, student-centred approach to assessment that encourages continuous improvement and affirms effort.

In terms of challenges, students reported difficulty in maintaining concentration and participation due to the sheer size of the classes and the anonymity it fosters. "You feel invisible in a class of 400," said one student EE from the College of Business and Management.

Many described a lack of personal connection to lecturers and peers, which diminished their sense of belonging. Physical factors, such as poor acoustics, limited seating, and lack of visual access to the board, also impeded engagement. One respondent FF noted, *“If you sit at the back, you can't hear or see anything. You just wait for someone to send you notes later.”* These conditions contributed to passive learning habits and a diminished academic identity, especially among first-year students still adjusting to university life. Despite these barriers, some students identified specific lecturer behaviours that helped bridge the engagement gap in large classes. Enthusiastic delivery, storytelling, and humour were cited as effective tools for holding attention. *“We had this one lecturer who made examples from daily life as it made the content real,”* one participant GG shared.

Others appreciated lecturers who circulated through the lecture hall, asked follow-up questions, or remembered students by name when possible. While these practices could not eliminate the structural limitations of large classes, they contributed to a sense of connection and respect. As one student HH put it,

“Even in a big class, if the lecturer makes the effort to engage, you feel like your presence matters.”

Collectively, these voices suggest that while systemic constraints remain, lecturer agency plays a crucial role in fostering engagement and academic resilience in large-class contexts.

Data Analysis: Major Themes

Lecturer Planning and Delivery

The theme of lecturer planning and delivery emerged prominently from the students' experiences. A well-structured and purposeful approach to content delivery was identified as crucial for fostering engagement in large classrooms. Students emphasized the importance of clarity and logical flow in lessons. A third-year student highlighted that when lecturers demonstrate thoughtful preparation, it enhances

comprehension and allows students to remain focused. Conversely, a lack of preparation, such as merely reading from slides, often led to disengagement. This suggests that students value intentionality in lesson planning, which not only aids in academic understanding but also contributes to maintaining attention and involvement during lectures.

Interactive Teaching Methods

Interactive teaching methods were another central theme identified by students, who expressed a clear preference for them over traditional, monologic lecture styles. Large classes, they noted, often default to lecture-based teaching, which restricts opportunities for student input and discussion. Interactive strategies such as think-pair-share, student response systems, and in-class debates were seen as effective ways to engage students and make them feel more “intellectually alive.” Students linked these methods to deeper learning and a sense of being seen in the classroom. However, such methods were perceived as rare, with many students noting the difference in class energy when lecturers implemented these strategies.

Evaluation and Feedback Practices

Evaluation and feedback were identified as significant factors influencing student engagement and academic motivation. Many students reported a lack of formative assessments, such as quizzes or feedback on assignments, in large classes. This absence of regular feedback left students uncertain about their academic progress, with some expressing frustration about the exclusive focus on exams. Students highlighted the importance of continuous, formative assessment that would provide opportunities for improvement and encourage ongoing engagement with the course material. This reflects the broader desire for a student-centred approach to assessment, where feedback is integrated into the learning process and not confined to the final evaluation.

Challenges of Large-Class Environments

The challenges posed by large-class environments emerged as a significant barrier to student engagement. Students noted that the size of the class often led to a sense of anonymity and isolation, reducing their motivation to participate. Factors such as poor acoustics, limited seating, and the inability to see or hear the lecturer clearly from the back of the room were identified as physical barriers that impeded active participation. Additionally, the absence of a personal connection to either the lecturer or fellow students diminished their sense of belonging, further affecting engagement. Despite these barriers, some students recognized specific lecturer behaviours, such as enthusiasm, storytelling, and personal recognition, as ways to mitigate the negative effects of large classes and create a more inclusive and engaging learning environment.

Overall Voice: Lecturer's Role in Enhancing Engagement

One of the main features across these themes is the significant role that lecturers play in shaping student engagement in large classrooms. While structural and environmental factors, such as class size and physical classroom conditions, pose significant challenges, it is the lecturer's pedagogical choices and behaviours that have the most immediate impact on student motivation and participation. Whether through careful planning, the use of interactive teaching methods, the implementation of formative assessment practices, or the adoption of engaging delivery styles, lecturers have the power to bridge the gap created by large-class environments. This highlights the centrality of lecturer agency in fostering a conducive learning atmosphere, even amidst systemic constraints.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirmed that student engagement in large class settings within Makerere University is shaped by an interplay of pedagogical, structural, and institutional factors. Students' perceptions of lecturer planning,

delivery methods, and assessment practices emerged as critical to their academic motivation and participation. These align with Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, which posits that students learn more when they are actively engaged both inside and outside the classroom. However, the ability of lecturers to design participatory experiences is often constrained by structural realities, including large student-to-teacher ratios and inadequate facilities, as noted by Akategeka and Sekiwu (2020). This infrastructural deficit is emblematic of wider tensions in African higher education, where rapid massification is rarely matched by proportional investment in teaching quality (Marginson, 2020).

The observed dominance of lecture-based instruction and the limited implementation of student-centred pedagogies reflect concerns widely reported in both local and global literature. Mugizi, Katuramu, and Ogaga Dafiewhare (2021) found that more participatory methods led to heightened engagement and improved student outcomes in Western Uganda, while Freeman et al. (2014) showed that active learning significantly enhances performance in STEM disciplines internationally. Students in this study who encountered even minimal interactive strategies—such as group work or real-life problem-solving—reported higher attentiveness and a stronger sense of connection. These findings were consistent with the global call to adapt pedagogical practices to the realities of large classes through inclusive and responsive methods (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2012; Glover, Kincaid, & Lewis, 2023).

Yet, barriers to sustained engagement remain pronounced. Students frequently cited the absence of formative feedback and opportunities for meaningful evaluation as disincentives to active learning. This supports Kahu's (2020) engagement framework, which emphasizes the importance of timely feedback and intellectual challenge as conditions for deep learning. Moreover, the lack of individualized attention in large classes contributes to feelings of anonymity, which, as Marginson (2019) and Tinto (1993) argue, undermines students' sense of academic

belonging—a critical determinant of persistence and success. These affective dimensions were evident in students' expressions of disengagement, fatigue, and low self-efficacy, especially in environments where lecturers were perceived as unapproachable or overly reliant on one-way communication.

At a systemic level, the findings echoed Marginson's (2021) argument that higher education must navigate the tensions between global competitiveness and local responsiveness. In Uganda, large-class pedagogy seems increasingly shaped by global neoliberal trends expanding access and reduced unit costs, but without parallel investments in pedagogical support or infrastructure. This reflects wider patterns described by Tight (2020) and Marginson (2020), where the push for inclusion is undermined by resource constraints, leading to compromised student experiences. Moreover, students' limited engagement with collaborative learning and digital tools reflects what Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2010) describe as a lack of cognitive presence in the learning environment, suggesting that digital and pedagogical innovation remains largely untapped in public university classrooms.

Finally, the study affirmed the need for a deliberate rethinking of teaching practices and policy frameworks governing large-class instruction. The literature suggested that high-impact practices, including peer-led learning, feedback loops, and integrated assessment strategies were not only scalable but effective even in resource-constrained settings (Kuh, 2009; Baker, Thompson, & Clark, 2023). Students' voices in this study called for more structured, dialogic, and equitable teaching methods that enhance connection and participation. Echoing the work of Williams, Lee, and Thompson (2022), equitable pedagogical strategies, especially those that value students' diverse experiences are fundamental to promoting inclusivity and academic engagement. As Saadati et al. (2025) and Strong (2024) note, the quality of student engagement cannot be improved through pedagogical change alone; institutional cultures

must also shift to value the relational, social, and emotional dimensions of learning.

LIMITATIONS

One key limitation of this qualitative study lies in its restricted generalizability. By focusing on a single institution and employing a case study design, the findings are context-specific and may not be applicable to other universities with different cultural, institutional, or pedagogical environments. Furthermore, reliance on self-reported data through interviews or focus groups may introduce bias, as participants might present socially desirable responses or have selective recall of their experiences. The interpretive nature of qualitative analysis also presents challenges related to researcher subjectivity, which, despite efforts to ensure credibility and trustworthiness, may influence data interpretation. Additionally, the study may not capture the full complexity of engagement dynamics in large classes, particularly those shaped by institutional policies, lecturer practices, or technological infrastructure that were beyond the scope of the student perspective. These limitations underscore the importance of triangulating findings with other methods and perspectives in future research.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the complex dynamics of student engagement in large undergraduate classes within Ugandan public universities. While students recognize the importance of participation in classroom activities for their academic success, their engagement is frequently hindered by didactic teaching approaches, minimal lecturer-student interaction, and systemic challenges such as overcrowding and inadequate instructional support. The research underscores that lecturer planning, teaching methods, and evaluation practices significantly shape students' levels of involvement, motivation, and perceived academic value. However, these individual efforts are often constrained by institutional limitations and broader structural factors. Enhancing student engagement in such contexts requires an integrated, multi-stakeholder approach that aligns

pedagogical innovation with institutional investment and supportive policy interventions.

This study reveals, from the students' perspectives, that engagement in large undergraduate classes is significantly hindered by limited interaction, passive instructional methods, and a lack of personalized support. Theoretically, these insights affirm and expand Astin's assertion that student involvement is shaped not only by internal motivation but also by the educational environment's capacity to facilitate active participation. Students consistently expressed that overcrowded lecture halls, one-way communication, and minimal opportunities for feedback constrained their ability to invest time and energy, both physical and psychological, into learning activities. This underscores the need to view involvement as context-sensitive, shaped by both student agency and structural realities. Practically, the study suggests that to enhance engagement, especially in large classes, universities like Makerere must adopt student-centred strategies such as smaller discussion groups, the use of interactive technologies, and more approachable lecturer-student dynamics. These changes, directly informed by student voices, can create more inclusive learning environments where students feel seen, heard, and meaningfully involved, thus operationalizing Astin's theory in a practical and contextually relevant way.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Lecturers should adopt more student-centred teaching practices that foster active participation, such as collaborative learning, peer instruction, problem-based learning, and formative assessments. These approaches have been shown to enhance interaction, motivation, and deep learning even in large classes. Additionally, lecturers need sustained professional development focused on large-class pedagogy, digital tools, inclusive strategies, and the use of feedback to adapt instruction to student needs.

University leaders should prioritize infrastructural and pedagogical support systems that facilitate effective engagement in large classes. This

includes investing in smart classrooms, and e-learning platforms, and employing teaching assistants to support instruction. Furthermore, institutions should recognize and reward pedagogical innovation and reduce the teaching loads of faculty who experiment with interactive methods, thus reinforcing a culture of teaching excellence.

The Ministry should allocate targeted funding to strengthen instructional quality in public universities, especially in response to massification. It should facilitate nationwide training programs for university lecturers in active and inclusive teaching methodologies. In addition, it can play a convening role in fostering partnerships with regional and international organizations that support higher education reform and digital pedagogy.

As a regulator, NCHE should develop and enforce minimum quality standards specific to teaching in large classes, including benchmarks for student engagement and classroom interaction. The council should regularly conduct institutional audits on teaching practices, incorporate student engagement metrics in performance reviews, and encourage the adoption of blended and flipped classroom models as viable alternatives to traditional lectures.

Policymakers must support the development of a national framework for student engagement that integrates academic, social, and emotional dimensions of learning. Such a framework should address structural inequities in access and quality, propose differentiated resource allocation models, and ensure that students' voices are included in higher education policy formulation. Holistic engagement strategies will be essential for improving student persistence, satisfaction, and long-term academic success in Uganda's public universities.

Areas for Future Research

Future research on student engagement in large classrooms should continue to centre student voices, as they provide invaluable insights into the lived experiences of learners in such settings. One

promising direction would be to conduct longitudinal studies that track changes in student engagement over time, particularly as universities implement teaching interventions and infrastructural improvements. These studies could examine the sustained impact of active learning strategies, collaborative learning, and technology-enhanced teaching on students' motivation, participation, and academic performance in large classes. Additionally, exploring the intersection of student engagement and globalization presents an exciting opportunity. As higher education becomes increasingly globalized, understanding how international students experience and engage in large classes alongside local students is crucial. Future studies could investigate whether cultural differences affect engagement levels, particularly in universities with diverse student populations, and how lecturers can tailor their practices to create inclusive, participatory environments for all students.

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