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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Beyond the platform: How flexible learning drives student engagement in Chinese universities

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The development of Information and Communication Technologies has led to the emergence of new skill demands, making flexible learning a feature of contemporary university teaching. As a developed form of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), Small Private Online Courses (SPOCs) allow higher education institutions to design course content to better support diverse student needs, such as personalised learning paths. In China, SPOCs have become an essential tool for delivering blended and flipped learning, yet how their institutional, pedagogical, technological and employment-related features affect student engagement remain under-researched.

This study examines students' experiences of flexible learning and the factors that influence their engagement in SPOC-based online learning environments in Chinese higher education. Drawing on the Flexible Learning Framework (Loon, 2021) and Reeve's model of student engagement (Reeve & Tseng, 2011), the flexible learning environment was assessed through five components: Institutional Systems and Structures (IS), Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL), Pedagogical Teacher Support (PTS), Pedagogical Content Quality (PCQ) and Perceived Employability (PE). Data were collected from 857 students across 19 universities in China, and 12 hypotheses were tested using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The conceptual model explained 82.5% of the variance of student engagement, comprising behavioural, emotional, cognitive and agentic dimensions. PE emerged as the strongest predictor of engagement, followed by PCQ, TEL and PTS, indicating that students tend to engage more when learning is connected to their future career development, when course content is well designed, and when technologies and teachers are responsive to their needs. IS had no significant direct effect on engagement but had a significant indirect effect through TEL, PCQ, PTS and PE, suggesting that institutional commitment is the antecedent of the whole system and it must be translated into accessible technology and pedagogy to take effect.

By empirically testing the interrelationships among the components of the Flexible Learning Framework and extending Reeve's engagement model to the SPOC context, this study shows how a flexible learning environment affects student engagement, offering practical implications for institutions, school managers and teachers aiming to improve student engagement in online learning environments. It is essential for higher education institutions to provide further professional training for teaching staff to translate institutional policies into effective pedagogical practices. At the same time, instructors and learning designers should embed career development components in learning content, such as building industry-relevant tasks to improve student employability, thus improving student engagement in flexible learning.

Keywords: flexible learning, student engagement, technology-enhanced learning, employability, Chinese universities

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