Understanding Root causes of Low Academic Engagement among University Students and Strategies for Improvement: A case of Rwanda

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Abstract

This study investigated the root causes of low academic engagement among university students in Rwanda and identifies strategies to improve their involvement in academic activities. A mixed-methods approach was used, with a sample of 394 students and 198 lecturers from five universities. Stratified random sampling was used for students, while simple random sampling was used for lecturers. The sample size was determined using Slovin's formula. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, focus group discussion and classroom observations. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations), while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that students exhibit low levels of engagement in key academic behaviors, such as attending classes regularly, participating in discussions, and utilizing academic support services. Contributing factors include a perceived lack of value in higher education, limited job prospects after graduation, excessive use of social media, and insufficient enforcement of university policies. Students also reported low levels of enthusiasm and academic curiosity, further aggravating the issue. The study identified several important strategies to address these challenges: the implementation of mentorship programs, career counseling, academic advising, and digital literacy workshops. Additionally, stricter enforcement of attendance and academic regulations, along with the adoption of innovative teaching methods and active learning strategies, are proposed to create a more engaging academic environment. The study stresses the need for universities to align their offerings with students' career expectations and to foster a supportive, interactive learning environment to enhance student engagement and academic success.

Key words: academic Engagement, university, students, effective strategies, enhancement

1. Introduction

Academic engagement of university students is considered as a fundamental pillar in shaping their learning experiences and eventual success within higher education (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012). Academic engagement is defined as the extent to which students invest themselves intellectually and emotionally in their academic pursuits. It covers active participation in learning activities, enthusiasm for coursework, and dedication to achieving educational goals (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Academic engagement not only influences individual academic achievement but also empowers the determination of broader

institutional outcomes such as student retention and satisfaction (Bowden,Tickle, & Naumann, 2021).

Academic engagement reflects students' involvement and investment in their learning journey. It goes beyond class attendance and completion of assignments; it also comprises of the passion and commitment of students towards their academic work (Cress, Collier & Reitenauer, 2023). Highly engaged students demonstrate proactive behaviors such as seeking out additional learning opportunities, engaging in discussions with peers and instructors, and persisting through academic challenges with resilience (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

University students encounter a wide range of challenges that can impact on their academic engagement in diverse ways. These challenges include motivational, organizational and environmental factors, all of which interact to shape students' experiences and perceptions within the educational setting (Krause & Coates, 2008). Motivational barriers represent a significant hurdle to academic engagement among university students. Motivation serves as a driving force behind students' willingness to invest effort and energy into their studies (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Challenges such as lack of intrinsic interest in course material, unclear future career goals, or perceptions of the irrelevance of coursework to personal aspirations can dampen students' enthusiasm and intrinsic motivation (Mitchell, 2015). External factors, including financial pressures and personal responsibilities, further complicate the students' motivation, potentially undermining their ability to maintain sustained engagement in their academic endeavors (id.).

In Rwanda the level of academic engagement among university students has recently decreased compare to the period shortly after 1994 genocide up recent years. This is because during this period university graduates were still few and everyone who could graduate was able to secure a job easily. The study of Sikubwabo, et al (2024) found that majority of university students in Rwanda do not concentrate much on their studies at university for a number of reasons. The most important reason is that their motivation went down due to the fact that many graduates do not secure jobs easily in the labor market just after graduation. For this reason, many young people go to study with no hope of getting employment opportunities just after graduating and this contribute greatly to their low level of academic engagement. The unemployment rate among university graduates in Rwanda was reported at 18.75% in 2022 (Trading Economics, 2022). The youth unemployment patterns in Rwanda show that 32.4% of unemployed youth are university graduates (Never Again Rwanda, 2023).

The study of Myint and Khaing (2020) found that motivation is the strongest internal factor influencing students' academic engagement. However, the study of Bizimana (2023) revealed that 67% of students at university are not motivated to pursue their studies at university; 27% of the students are slightly motivated while 6% of them are motivated. This correlate with their engagement in class activities because those who are not motivated are the ones who do not concentrate on lecturers and class works. The study of Senior, Reddy and Senior (2014) revealed a strong correlation between students' job prospects and students' engagement into their university studies. The researchers recommended that there should be strong collaboration between universities, the government and private sector federation in finding out strong strategies to enable graduates to create jobs. The study of Mugabe and Ndayambaje (2022) concluded that large classes at University of Rwanda, College of Education limit students'

academic engagement. Their study recommended organizing classes ahead of teaching, maintaining students' attention and setting classroom rules to minimize disruptive behaviors.

The study of Kayiranga (2022) found that students' engagement in Rwanda is at risk and there is a need of Government's intervention to mitigate this academic disaster. The study found that most of students at university show little interest in attending classes and in following lectures. The author places the blame to the education system of Rwanda which seems to be lenient in putting up stringent measures that put much pressure on students in order to increase their academic engagement. Students' low engagement is found more in private Higher Learning Institutions than in public ones. The same study found that 43.9 % of the students in Private universities show little enthusiasm to their learning versus 67.3 % in public universities. The author opines that private universities consider their students as customers not as clients, and then they treat them as kings and queens. In other words, they do not apply harsh rules and regulations to them for fear of losing them all. Additionally, the functioning of private higher learning institutions depends on tuition fees paid by the students (Epps, 2021). Therefore, the students are considered as sources of income (Teixeira & Koryakina, 2011) which these institutions can lose any time if they do not cherish their students.

Academic engagement of university students holds insightful implications for their educational journey and institutional outcomes (Coates, 2008). By addressing challenges such as motivational barriers, time management issues, and digital distractions, and by implementing effective strategies such as active learning methodologies, personalized learning approaches, and educational technologies, institutions can create supportive environments that foster enhanced student engagement and academic achievement (id.). Assessing and comprehending the factors that shape students' academic engagement is crucial for educators, administrators, and policymakers alike (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). This is because it can stakeholders in developing informed strategies and interventions aimed at fostering environments conducive to enhanced engagement and improved learning outcomes.

This research aims to analyze the level of academic engagement among university students, with a focus on identifying prevalent challenges and exploring effective strategies for enhancement. The study was based on the following specific objectives:

1. To assess the level of academic engagement among university students in Rwanda.

2. Investigate the root causes of low academic engagement among university students in Rwanda

3. To explore effective strategies and interventions to be employed by universities and educators to improve academic engagement among university students

The existing literature reveals that few studies have examined the level of student engagement in higher education institutions. This study adds to the current body of research on student engagement by investigating the status of academic engagement among university students and providing practical recommendations for relevant stakeholders. By fostering culture of academic engagement in universities, students can be empowered to become active participants in their

learning process, ultimately improving retention rates, academic performance, and overall satisfaction with the university experience (Trowler, 2010).

2. Literature review

This literature review explores theoretical frameworks, particularly Self-Determination Theory (SDT), to understand academic engagement in university students. It examines the role of intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and social interactions in shaping engagement. The review also discusses the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of engagement, as well as factors contributing to low engagement. Finally, it highlights strategies for enhancing engagement, such as active learning and supportive environments, with a focus on Rwandan universities.

2.1 Theoretical review

This study is grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) which was developed by Deci and Ryan in 1985. It is a widely recognized psychological theory that focuses on motivation and the factors that promote or hinder self-determined behavior. Self-Determination Theory posits that individuals have three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are satisfied, individuals experience greater intrinsic motivation, which leads to enhanced engagement and well-being. Conversely, when these needs are thwarted, extrinsic motivation or disengagement may result.

The theory divides motivation into two broad types: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity for the inherent satisfaction it brings, while extrinsic motivation involves engaging in an activity to achieve a separable outcome (e.g., rewards, grades). According to Self-Determination Theory, environments that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness foster intrinsic motivation and greater engagement. In contrast, environments that are controlling, punitive, or fail to meet these psychological needs can lead to disengagement and diminished academic performance.

Self-Determination Theory is highly relevant to understanding the root causes of low academic engagement among university students in Rwanda. Many students may experience a lack of autonomy in their educational experience, as they might feel disconnected from their course content or forced into a rigid academic structure. If students perceive their education as being overly controlled by external pressures such as exams or institutional expectations rather than personally meaningful), they may become disengaged. Additionally, the quality of student-teacher relationships, peer interactions, and the general campus environment will play a significant role in fulfilling the need for relatedness. The research will likely uncover how the fulfillment or thwarting of these psychological needs contributes to low academic engagement, and suggest strategies that universities can adopt to foster a more supportive and motivating learning environment.

2.2 The level of academic engagement among university students

Student engagement in academic activities is a critical factor contributing to the overall success of students studying in higher education institutions. Academic engagement happens when students dive deep into learning activities, when they are mentally and emotionally absorbed by

the study materials, and often when interacting with peers (Amerstorfer & Freiin von Münster-Kistner, 2021). Academic engagement goes beyond "surface learning" to Hattie and Yates (2014) like content memorization and fulfilling requirements to achieve a passing grade for a course. It draws students into intense thinking activities like analyzing and understanding concepts, rationalizing procedures, and deducing meaning. It involves social interaction with peers and the teacher, in the form of exchanging experiences, knowledge, opinions, and support (Amerstorfer & Freiin von Münster-Kistner, 2021).

According to Finn and Zimmer (2012) engagement can be understood through three dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. They describe behavioral engagement as encompassing participation and active involvement in activities. Emotional engagement pertains to student attitudes, interests, and values, whereas cognitive engagement involves motivational goals and self-regulated learning (Sharan & Tan, 2008). The study by Junco and Cotten (2012) found that technology advancement brought about a decreased academic engagement among students at university. The study found that students who use Facebook and other social media platforms while studying tend to have lower academic performance and engagement. The study also revealed that constant connectivity can lead to divided attention and reduced ability to focus on academic tasks. Furthermore, the study of Trowler (2010) concluded societal and economic pressures, such as the rising costs of education and concerns about future job prospects has led to decreased students motivation and commitment to their studies.

Regarding student engagement, educational institutions have an important role to play (Sheard, Carbone & Hurst, 2010). 21st century students are considerably diverse in backgrounds, personalities, and learning styles (DiLullo, McGee & Kriebel, 2011), but teachers should consider what it is that motivates students to become more engaged (Zepke, Leach & Butler, 2010). According to Darroch (2023), today's learners are less engaged due employed methods of teaching which do not match with their preferences. The author recommends that faculty members should hold students accountable, allow them to self-direct, encourage them to innovate, meet them where they are digitally and provide relevant examples to help what they are teaching come to life.

2.3 Factors contributing to low academic engagement among university students

Myint and Khaing (2020) conducted a meta-analysis study to investigate Factors influencing academic engagement of university students. The results showed that academic self-efficacy, academic satisfaction, academic performance, motivation, and valuing were found to be the related internal factors which influence academic engagement. Motivation is a central factor affecting academic engagement. Deci and Ryan (2000) propose Self-Determination Theory, which suggests that intrinsic motivation (e.g., interest in the subject matter) and extrinsic motivation (e.g., grades or external rewards) significantly impact student engagement. When students lack intrinsic motivation or perceive tasks as externally controlled, their engagement tends to decrease.

A study by Munyakazi and Ntukanyagwe (2019) explores how cultural factors, including traditional norms and values, influence academic engagement among university students in Rwanda. They argue that cultural expectations regarding family responsibilities and societal roles often conflict with academic pursuits, leading to reduced commitment and involvement in

educational activities. Another critical aspect identified by Uwamahoro and Munyentwali (2020) is the impact of inadequate infrastructure and resources on academic engagement. They highlight issues such as limited access to libraries, outdated teaching materials, and inadequate internet connectivity as barriers that hinder student engagement and academic success.

The quality of the teaching and learning environment is also a significant factor. Nzayisenga and Ntayi (2018) discuss how factors such as outdated teaching methods, large class sizes, and a lack of student-teacher interaction contribute to disengagement among Rwandan university students. They emphasize the need for innovative teaching approaches and improved student support services. Psychosocial factors such as stress, anxiety, and personal challenges also play a role in academic engagement. Gakire and Ntihinyurwa (2017) examine how mental health issues and personal circumstances affect student motivation and involvement in academic activities, proposing interventions to support students' well-being. The study of Hanaysha, Shriedeh and In'airat (2023) reveled that lack of teacher competency and inadequate ICT resources have negative effect on both academic performance and student engagement.

Psychosocial factors such as stress, anxiety, and mental health issues can also affect academic engagement. A study by Wong and colleagues (2019) explores how psychological distress negatively impacts students' ability to engage effectively with their studies, highlighting the need for supportive interventions to enhance well-being and academic performance.

2.4 Effective strategies to enhance academic engagement among students

Academic engagement is crucial for student success and involves the active participation, motivation, and investment in learning activities. Various strategies have been explored to enhance academic engagement across different educational contexts. The study of Abou-Khalil et al (2021 showed that student–content engagement strategies, e.g., screen sharing, summaries, and class recordings, are perceived as the most effective, closely followed by student–teacher strategies, e.g., Q and A sessions and reminders. Student–student strategies, e.g., group chat and collaborative work, are perceived as the least effective.

Active learning promotes engagement by encouraging students to participate actively in the learning process. According to Prince (2004), active learning techniques such as problem-based learning, group discussions, and peer teaching can significantly enhance student engagement by fostering deeper understanding and critical thinking skills. Incorporating technology into teaching can enhance engagement by appealing to students' digital literacy and interests. Hwang and Tsai (2011) suggest that using educational technologies such as interactive simulations, online forums, and multimedia resources can increase student motivation and engagement in learning activities.

Tailoring learning experiences to students' individual interests, abilities, and learning styles can enhance engagement. According to Hattie and Yates (2014), personalized learning strategies such as differentiated instruction and adaptive learning platforms can optimize student engagement by providing relevant and challenging tasks that match students' needs. Positive relationships between teachers and students create a supportive learning environment that promotes engagement. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) emphasize the importance of teacher encouragement, feedback, and mentorship in fostering student motivation and engagement in academic tasks. The study of Sadoughi and Hejazi (2023) found that providing

learners with substantial support and encouragement can enhance their learning experience, which could in turn considerably affect their motivated learning behaviour. Consequently, learners who are motivated and willing to exert effort in learning and classroom activities would be more engaged in their learning process.

Adopting culturally responsive teaching practices acknowledges and incorporates students' diverse cultural backgrounds into the curriculum. Gay (2010) argues that culturally relevant pedagogy can enhance student engagement by making learning materials more relatable and meaningful to students' lived experiences. The physical and psychological classroom environment plays a significant role in student engagement. According to Weinstein, Husman, and Dierking (2000), creating a positive and stimulating learning environment through effective classroom management, clear expectations, and supportive peer relationships can enhance student motivation and engagement. The study of Chan, Maneewan, Koul (2023) revealed that practical applications once used in teaching can help in boosting students' academic engagement. The study of Hu and Wang (2023) concluded that EFL teachers' interpersonal communication abilities (e.g., immediacy) foster learners' academic engagement.

In general, educators at university want students to engage deeply in study activities because students' dedication and effort have a positive effect on learning success and achievement (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Teachers are in a position in which they can shape the engagement of students (Skinner & Pitzer, 2013) by creating a facilitative, motivating learning environment. Mercer and Dörnyei (2020), for instance, recommend the "Socratic method" for teaching that is asking questions to promote critical thinking, as well as getting students to prepare questions for each other, which leads to sustainable and transferrable learning outcomes. Another way to increase academic engagement is discovery approaches to generate curiosity by letting students find out answers to questions and solutions to problems by themselves "simply for the reward of the pleasure of knowing more" (Mercer and Dörnyei, 2020). Such activities involve students in profound, meaningful thinking processes that create knowledge (e.g., by analyzing, comparing, reflecting, and contrasting information) instead of merely consuming knowledge.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and effective strategies for improving academic engagement among university students. According to Creswell (2014), a mixed-methods approach allows researchers to triangulate data from different sources, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings.

3.2 Population and sample

The population for this study consisted of all the university students in Rwanda from various disciplines and academic levels. The report from the Ministry of education (2023) indicates that there were 109,256 students and 6,250 teaching staff in all of the higher learning institutions in Rwanda. Considering the large size of the population, the researchers opted to use an accessible population size of 24,008 students and 389 lecturers from 5 universities in Rwanda (1 public and 4 private). Furthermore, the study involved 2 colleges to stand in the entire University of

Rwanda, the one selected public university. The study involved a sample of 393 students and 129 lecturers from the 5 selected universities. The sample size was determined by using the Slovin formula as descried by Sekaran & Bougie (2019).

The formula was applied as follows:

n= N/ (1+Ne^2)

n= Sample size

N=Population size

e= Margin of error equal to 5% (0.05) at 95% confidence level

Sample for students

n = 24008/(1+24008x 0.05^2)

n=394 students

Sample for lecturers

n = 389/(1+389x 0.05^2)

n= 198 lecturers

For the students, a stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representation from different demographics such as age, gender, and academic majors. For the lecturers, simple random sampling was used in selecting them.

3.3 Data collection instruments

A structured questionnaire was developed to collect quantitative data from lecturers regarding the level of students' academic engagement, factors influencing low academic engagement, and strategies to address the issue. The questionnaire included Likert scale items (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree). Focus group discussions were conducted to gather information regarding the experiences, perspectives, and insights of students regarding academic engagement challenges and effective strategies (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Focus groups were organized based on key demographic characteristics to ensure diverse perspectives. Furthermore, classroom observation was utilized in collecting data related to students' level of engagement in academic activities. In addition, the researchers used observation as an instrument in gathering information regarding observable students' behaviors which exhibit their level of engagement in different academic activities.

3.4 Validity and reliability

To establish validity of the instruments the researchers used panels of experts in education and research methodology who provided some comments for improvement. To establish reliability of the instruments, a pilot study along with Cronbach's alpha test were used to assess the internal consistency of the instruments. As per Nunnally (1978), a Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 or higher indicates acceptable reliability. The results showed that all constructs had a Cronbach's alpha above 0.70, confirming the reliability of the survey instruments. The following table displays the Cronbach alpha results by each objective.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics (Cronbach's Alpha)

Variables	N of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Comment
Level of academic engagement	19	.898	Accepted
Root causes of low academic engagement	15	.834	Accepted
Effective strategies and interventions	19	.913	Accepted

Source: Research data, 2024

3.5 Data analysis

Frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations were calculated to summarize the quantitative survey data. Transcripts from focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to academic engagement, influencing factors, and effective strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was conducted to categorize and interpret the qualitative data. Findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses were triangulated to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon, ensuring the validity and reliability of the results.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Participants were provided with detailed information about the study objectives, procedures, risks, and benefits before obtaining their consent to participate. Measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants' responses.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings of the study and their subsequent discussion, which emanate from data gathered from both lecturers and students at the chosen universities. The analysis of this data aligns closely with the predefined objectives of the study, providing valuable insights into various aspects of academic engagement by university students.

4.1 Level of academic engagement among university students in Rwanda

This section presents the findings related to the level of academic engagement among university students in Rwanda, addressing the first objective. The data here reflects the degree of agreement or disagreement with the statements provided, as measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

Table 2: Level of academic engagement among university students in Rwanda

Statements	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std
The majority of my students are not consistently present for classes.	198	1.00	5.00	4.4341	1.15139
The majority of my students do not arrive on time for lectures and other academic activities.	198	1.00	5.00	4.5039	1.25077
The majority of my students are not actively engaged in class discussions and do not ask questions.	198	1.00	5.00	4.6899	1.23616

The majority of my students are not involved in group activities and collaborative projects.	198	1.00	5.00	4.5581	1.09621
The majority of my students do not volunteer to answer questions or share their opinions during lectures.	198	1.00	5.00	4.6977	1.42305
The majority of my students do not complete assigned readings, homework, and other tasks on time.	198	1.00	5.00	4.2093	1.28498
The majority of my students are not always prepared for class discussions and activities.	198	1.00	5.00	4.6977	1.42305
The majority of my students do not demonstrate a high level of engagement in preparing for exams.	198	1.00	5.00	4.5736	1.24859
The majority of my students do not utilize available resources such as textbooks, online materials, and library resources.	198	1.00	5.00	3.7907	1.43980
The majority of my students do not demonstrate a high level of engagement in joining study groups.	198	1.00	5.00	4.4651	1.13912
The majority of my students do not take advantage of office hours or tutoring services for additional support.	198	1.00	5.00	4.6744	1.14675
The majority of my students are not involved in extracurricular activities related to their academic interests.	198	1.00	5.00	3.1628	1.44585
The majority of my students do not participate in academic clubs, research projects, or community service initiatives.	198	1.00	5.00	4.6667	1.23954
The majority of my students are not distracted by non-academic uses of technology, such as social media or entertainment apps.	198	1.00	5.00	4.1860	1.02139
The majority of my students do not demonstrate enthusiasm and curiosity about the subject matter.	198	1.00	5.00	4.8062	.92768
The majority of my students are not proactive in seeking out opportunities for academic growth and development.	198	1.00	5.00	4.6047	1.39988
The majority of my students do not show resilience and perseverance in overcoming academic challenges.	198	1.00	5.00	3.6434	1.24247
The majority of my students are not reflective about their academic progress and areas for improvement.	198	1.00	5.00	4.5736	1.08811

The majority of my students do not actively seek feedback to enhance their learning experience.	198	1.00	5.00	4.9302	1.24490

Source: Research data, 2024.

Note: Strongly Disagree= [1-2[= **Very Low mean;** Disagree= [2-3[**=Low mean; Neutral**= [3-4[**=moderated mean;** Agree= [4-5[**=High mean** Strongly Agree =[5-[= **very high mean**

The data in table 2 show that majority of involved lecturers agreed with the fact that majority of their students are not consistently present for classes (μ=4.4341, STD=1.15139), do not arrive on time for lectures and other academic activities (μ= 4.5039, STD=1.25077), are not actively engage in class discussions and ask questions (μ= 4.6899, STD=1.23616), are not involved in group activities and collaborative projects (μ= 4.5581, STD=1.09621), do not volunteer to answer questions or share their opinions during lectures (μ=4.6977, STD=1.42305); are not always prepared for class discussions and activities (μ=4.6977, STD=1.42305); do not demonstrate high level of engagement in preparing for exams (μ=4.5736, STD=1.24859), do not demonstrate high level of engagement in Joining study groups (μ=4.4651, STD=1.13912), do not take advantage of office hours or tutoring services for additional support (μ=4.6744, STD=1.14675); The majority of their students do not participate in academic clubs, research projects, or community service initiatives (μ=4.6667, STD=1.23954); are not distracted by non-academic uses of technology, such as social media or entertainment apps (μ=4.1860, STD=1.02139); do not demonstrate enthusiasm and curiosity about the subject matter (μ=4.8062, STD=.92768); are not proactive in seeking out opportunities for academic growth and development (μ=4.6047, STD=1.39988.) ; are not reflective about their academic progress and areas for improvement (μ=4.5736, STD=1.08811) and do not actively seek feedback to enhance their learning experience (μ=4.9302, STD=1.24490).

In addition the data in table 2 show that majority of respondents were neutral about the following statements: majority of my students do not utilize available resources such as textbooks, online materials, and library resources (μ=3.7907, STD=1.43980); majority of my students are not involved in extracurricular activities related to their academic interests (μ=3.1628, TD=1.44585), majority of my students do not show resilience and perseverance in overcoming academic challenges (μ=3.6434, TD=1.24247).

The data presented in Table 2 offer a comprehensive picture of lecturers' perceptions regarding various aspects of student engagement and participation within academic settings. The findings highlight several concerning trends, indicating a widespread lack of consistent attendance, punctuality, active involvement in discussions, participation in group activities, and utilization of academic support services among students.

One notable observation is the prevalence of non-engagement in class activities and discussions, as highlighted by lecturers' perceptions of students' limited participation, both in terms of asking questions and contributing to group projects. This aligns with previous studies (Fredricks et al., 2004), which have also identified a similar disconnect between students' actual involvement in classroom interactions and the desired level of engagement expected by educators. Such findings emphasize the need for strategies aimed at fostering a more interactive and participatory learning environment to enhance student engagement and academic outcomes.

Furthermore, the data point to a lack of proactive behavior among students in seeking out additional academic support and opportunities for growth, as evidenced by low utilization rates of office hours, tutoring services, and participation in extracurricular activities. This echoes findings from Tinto (2013), which have emphasized the importance of proactive student behaviors in maximizing learning outcomes and personal development. It emphasizes the necessity for institutions to implement initiatives that promote and incentivize student engagement beyond the confines of traditional classroom activities.

Another notable aspect highlighted in the data is the widespread distraction posed by non-academic uses of technology, such as social media and entertainment apps. This aligns with the broader discourse on the impact of digital distractions on student learning and attention spans (Junco & Cotten, 2012). It underlines the need for educators to employ effective strategies for managing and mitigating technological distractions in educational settings, while also promoting digital literacy and responsible use of technology among students.

Moreover, the data reveal a general lack of enthusiasm, curiosity, and reflection among students regarding their academic progress and areas for improvement. This mirrors findings from Dweck (2006), which have highlighted the importance of fostering a growth mindset and cultivating a culture of continuous self-assessment and improvement among students. It stresses the need for educational institutions to prioritize the development of metacognitive skills and provide opportunities for students to engage in reflective practices that enhance their learning experience and academic success.

During the interviews, the students were asked to rate their level of academic involvement in their academic activities. Most of the involved students show that their level of academic engagements is not satisfactory. This is because their rating shows that their level of engagement is at 6.1 out 10. Some even acknowledged their poor engagement outright, providing tangible evidence of their lack of academic involvement. For instance, in the focus group discussions one student admitted, *"I often miss classes without valid reasons, and when questioned by lecturers, I just keep quiet"*. Another confessed, *"I consistently submit assignments late without feeling any remorse."* In the same view, a student honestly stated, *"I never prepare for exams; I simply write whatever comes to mind during the test, unconcerned about the outcome."* These sentiments collectively suggest a notable lack of commitment among university students in Rwandan universities, with little regard for academic performance or its consequences.

Moreover, the indifference extends beyond academic pursuits to extracurricular activities. Many students view participation in such activities as unproductive, preferring to allocate their time elsewhere. One respondent from the focus group discussion stated, *"Since enrolling in this university, I have abstained from attending any meetings or engaging in extracurricular endeavors; clubs and recreational activities are not among my hobbies."* This attitude highlights a broader reluctance among students to actively engage beyond the academic sphere, further emphasizing their lack of interest in personal and academic development.

In addition, the researchers conducted some classroom observations to assess the students' level of engagement in different academic activities. It was found that majority of the observed students are not actively engaged in their lessons. The results from the observations are displayed in is table 2 below.

Table 3: Results from classroom observations

S/N	Observed behaviors	Frequency	%
1	The students who are consistently present for classes	204	52
2	The students who arrive on time for lectures and other academic activities	193	49
3	The students who are actively engage in class discussions and ask questions	224	57
4	The students who volunteer to answer questions or share their opinions during lectures	94	24
5	The students who demonstrate enthusiasm and curiosity about the subject matter	67	17
6	The students actively follow the lectures to the end	71	18
7	The students who avoid any distractions during the lectures	94	24
8	The Students who never go out every now and then during the lecturer	130	33
9	The students who never use telephones during lectures	110	28
10	The students who put up hands when the lecturer asks a question	31	8
11	Students who take notes in all lecturers	244	62
12	The students who never sleep in class	299	76

Source: Research data, 2024

The results in Table 3 present the findings from classroom observations regarding students' engagement in academic activities. The results show that:

- 52% of observed students are consistently present for classes, indicating a majority but not all students attend regularly. This finding aligns with Raby and Vale (2019), who found that regular attendance, is positively correlated with academic success and engagement.
- 49% arrive on time for lectures and other academic activities, showing a significant portion of students are punctual. Kelly et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of punctuality in academic settings for effective learning outcomes, which supports this finding.
- 57% actively engage in class discussions and ask questions, suggesting a relatively high level of participation in interactive learning activities. Tinto (2013) emphasized the benefits of interactive learning environments and student engagement in discussions for deeper understanding and retention of course material, aligning with this finding.
- Only 24% volunteer to answer questions or share opinions during lectures, indicating a lower rate of active participation in discussions initiated by the instructor. This finding is consistent with Hamann and Wilson (2018), who also found relatively low rates of student participation in discussions initiated by instructors.

- 17% demonstrate enthusiasm and curiosity about the subject matter, indicating that a minority of students exhibit a keen interest in the material.
- 18% actively follow lectures to the end, suggesting a relatively low level of sustained attention throughout the entire lecture.
- 24% avoid distractions during lectures, indicating that distractions are present for a significant portion of students.
- 33% never leave during the lecture, which implies that a sizable portion of students do leave the classroom during lectures.
- 28% never use phones during lectures, suggesting that a considerable number of students engage in phone usage during class.
- Only 8% put up their hands when the lecturer asks a question, indicating a low rate of participation in interactive questioning.
- 62% of students take notes in all lectures, showing a majority engaging in this study strategy.
- 76% never sleep in class, indicating that most students manage to stay awake during lectures.

Indeed, the findings suggest a mix of engagement levels among students, with some areas showing relatively high participation (e.g., attendance, taking notes) and others indicating lower engagement (e.g., active participation in discussions, avoiding distractions). Universities in Rwanda should look for opportunities for improvement in increasing active participation and reducing distractions to enhance the overall learning experience for students.

4.2 Causes of low academic engagement among university students in Rwanda

The second objective of the study was to find out factors contributing to low academic engagement among university students in Rwanda. The data for this particular objective were obtained through questionnaires and interviews administered to university lecturers and students respectively. The respective findings are presented in table 3 below.

Table 4: Factors contributing to low academic engagement among university students in Rwanda

Statement	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std
The students place less importance on the university degree	198	3.00	5.00	4.0155	.70694
There is a lack of optimism regarding immediate job prospects upon graduation	198	3.00	5.00	4.1473	.80137
Financial limitations experienced by university students or their families	198	1.00	5.00	2.1705	1.11890
The absence of high-quality education within universities	198	1.00	5.00	2.0310	.98376
Inadequate infrastructure	198	1.00	5.00	2.1938	1.01610
Inadequate instructional materials	198	1.00	5.00	2.1008	.99094
Insufficient motivation for university studies by students	198	3.00	5.00	3.9380	.75779

Ineffective support systems within Rwandan universities	198	1.00	5.00	2.1938	1.10452
Widespread indifference among the youth in Rwanda	198	3.00	5.00	4.1550	.77510
Mixture of employment and class attendance	198	1.00	5.00	2.0000	.97628
Excessive use of social media among university students	198	3.00	5.00	4.0620	.82682
Diminished rigor exhibited by teaching staff and university authorities	198	1.00	5.00	3.8140	1.02901
The university's rules and regulations are not fully enforced	198	3.00	5.00	4.2636	.67915
The teaching methods employed by university lecturers are not yielding effective results	198	1.00	5.00	2.0000	.97628
The implementation of the curriculum is tedious	198	1.00	5.00	1.8837	1.02795

Source: Research data, 2024

Note: Strongly Disagree= **[1-2[= Very Low mean;** Disagree= **[2-3[=Low mean;** Neutral= **[3-4[=moderated mean;** Agree= **[4-5[=High mean;** Strongly Agree =**[5-[= very high mean**

The data in table 4 show that the most prominent factors influencing low academic engagement among university students in Rwanda include the fact that university students place less importance on the university degree (μ=4.0155, SD=0.70694); there is a lack of optimism regarding immediate job prospects upon graduation (μ=4.1473, SD=0.80137), widespread indifference among the youth in Rwanda (μ=4.1550, SD=0.77510), excessive use of social media among university students (μ=4.0620, SD=0.82682), the university's rules and regulations are not fully enforced (μ=4.1140, SD=1.02901), and diminished rigor exhibited by teaching staff and university authorities (μ=4.2636, SD=0.67915).

The observation that university students place less importance on the university degree implies a potential shift in the perceived value of higher education credentials among students. This shift may stem from various factors, including evolving job market dynamics, changing societal attitudes towards education, and the proliferation of alternative pathways to career success. Previous research by Arum and Roksa (2011) has indicated a trend towards the devaluation of a college degree, with increasing emphasis placed on practical skills and job readiness. This trend entails the need for higher education institutions to adapt their curricula and offerings to align with contemporary career demands.

The lack of optimism regarding immediate job prospects upon graduation highlights students' concerns about their employability and career opportunities post-education. This finding echoes with studies by Jackson (2018), which highlight the significance of perceived job market prospects in shaping students' engagement and motivation in higher education. In an increasingly competitive job market, students may perceive a disconnect between their educational experiences and the skills demanded by employers, leading to diminished confidence in their post-graduation prospects. Addressing this disconnect requires collaboration between educational institutions and industry stakeholders to ensure alignment between curricula and workforce needs.

The widespread indifference among the youth in Rwanda towards education may reflect broader societal attitudes and perceptions regarding the relevance and value of formal education. These trends stress the importance of addressing systemic barriers to educational engagement, including socio-economic disparities, lack of access to quality education, and limited opportunities for academic and career advancement. Implementing targeted interventions that promote the intrinsic value of learning, foster a culture of academic excellence, and provide support for disadvantaged students can help mitigate indifference and revive enthusiasm for education.

The excessive use of social media among university students poses a significant challenge to academic engagement and performance. Research by Kirschner and Karpinski (2010) has highlighted the detrimental effects of technology use, including social media, on students' attention spans, information processing abilities, and academic outcomes. The pervasive nature of social media platforms can serve as a distractor, diverting students' attention away from academic pursuits and diminishing their overall productivity. Addressing this issue requires promoting digital literacy skills, implementing strategies to minimize distractions, and fostering a balanced approach to technology use both inside and outside the classroom. The perception that university rules and regulations are not fully enforced points to potential institutional challenges in maintaining discipline and fostering a conducive learning environment. Inadequate enforcement of rules may lead to a breakdown in classroom management, compromise academic integrity, and undermine the overall effectiveness of educational interventions.

4.3 Effective strategies to improve academic engagement among university students

Regarding the third objective, this study sought to explore effective strategies and interventions to be employed by universities and educators to enhance academic engagement among students. The relevant results are presented in table 4 below.

Table 5: Effective strategies and interventions to be employed by universities and educators to enhance academic engagement among students

Statement	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std
Implementing mentorship programs to students	198	1.00	5.00	4.3101	1.05917
Providing career counseling services	198	1.00	5.00	4.3101	1.05917
Increasing the availability of scholarships and financial aid	198	2.00	5.00	2.9457	.57704
Enhancing faculty training and curriculum development efforts	198	2.00	5.00	2.8450	.57892
Investing in infrastructure upgrades	198	2.00	5.00	3.0000	.69597
Ensuring sufficient access to instructional materials	198	2.00	5.00	2.9922	.61867
Training the students on different strategies to secure jobs in the labor market	198	1.00	5.00	4.4031	.98043
Offering incentives and recognition for academic achievements	198	2.00	5.00	2.8062	.58733
Strengthening academic advising and counseling services	198	1.00	5.00	4.5116	.97721
Promoting community engagement and volunteerism	198	1.00	5.00	2.7132	.76233

Availing job opportunities to the youth	198	3.00	5.00	4.6667 .53522
Implementing flexible scheduling options to accommodate students balancing employment with class attendance.	198	1.00	5.00	2.7364 .69055
Incorporating digital literacy and responsible social media usage workshops	198	1.00	5.00	4.5271 .96887
Enhancing faculty development programs	198	1.00	5.00	2.8527 .74057
Establishing clearer guidelines and consequences for non-compliance	198	1.00	5.00	2.6977 .73532
Introducing innovative teaching methods and active learning strategies	198	1.00	5.00	4.3566 .99842
Streamlining and updating curriculum delivery methods	198	2.00	5.00	2.9070 .71197
Implementing strict rules regarding class attendance, examination and academic promotion	198	1.00	5.00	4.5426 1.03084
Optimizing the use of telephones or social media in classroom setting	198	1.00	5.00	4.4031 1.07179

Source: Research data, 2024

Note: Strongly Disagree= [1-2[= **Very Low mean;** Disagree= [2-3[=**Low mean;** Neutral= [3-4[=**moderated mean;** Agree= [4-5[=**High mean;** Strongly Agree =[5-[= **very high mean**

The data in table 5 show that the most effective strategies and interventions to be employed by universities and educators to enhance academic engagement among students are namely: Implementing mentorship programs to students(μ=4.3101, SD=0. 1.05917), Providing career counseling services(μ=4.3101, SD=1.05917), Training the students on different strategies to secure jobs in the labor market(μ=4.4031, SD=0. .98043), Strengthening academic advising and counseling services(μ=4.5116, SD=0. .97721), Availing job opportunities to university graduates(μ=4.6667, SD=0.53522), Incorporating digital literacy and responsible social media usage workshops(μ=4.5271, SD=0. .96887), Introducing innovative teaching methods and active learning strategies(μ=4.3566, SD=0.99842), Implementing strict rules regarding class attendance, examination and academic promotion (μ=4.5426, SD=0. 1.03084) and Optimizing the use of telephones or social media in classroom setting (μ=4.4031, SD=0. 1.07179).

The high mean score and low standard deviation indicate strong agreement among students regarding the effectiveness of mentorship programs in promoting academic engagement. Mentorship has been shown in previous research (e.g., Tinto, 2013) to positively impact student retention, motivation, and academic success by providing guidance, support, and role modeling. Mentors offer personalized advice, share experiences, and offer encouragement, which can enhance students' sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy.

Strengthening academic advising and counseling services is perceived as crucial for promoting academic engagement. Previous studies (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2009) have demonstrated the positive impact of personalized advising and support services on student retention, academic performance, and overall well-being. Research (e.g., Holford et al., 2013) emphasizes the role of

internships, placements, and networking opportunities in facilitating students' transition from education to employment.

The perception of digital literacy workshops as beneficial for enhancing academic engagement highlights the importance of preparing students for success in the digital age. Research (e.g., Bennett et al., 2008) underlines the significance of digital literacy skills in mitigating the negative effects of excessive technology use on academic performance. This finding aligns with research (e.g., Prince, 2004) demonstrating the positive impact of active learning approaches on student motivation, participation, and learning outcomes.

The implementation of strict rules regarding attendance, examination, and academic promotion is perceived as important for promoting academic engagement. Previous studies (e.g., Beattie et al., 2017) have shown that clear expectations and accountability mechanisms can enhance student commitment, responsibility, and academic performance. Strict rules promote academic integrity, discipline, and a culture of excellence, ensuring that students are actively engaged in their academic pursuits and adhere to established standards of conduct. Optimizing the use of telephones or social media in the classroom setting is viewed as a potential strategy for enhancing academic engagement.

5. Discussion

The findings of this research reveal concerning trends in student engagement in Rwandan universities, indicating significant disengagement in various academic behaviors. It was found that students frequently miss classes, arrive late, and fail to participate actively in discussions or group activities, which negatively impacts their academic development. These findings align with previous studies, which emphasize the importance of regular attendance and active participation for meaningful learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). Moreover, the underutilization of academic support services, such as office hours and tutoring, highlights a lack of proactive engagement among students, reflecting findings from Tinto (2013), who stressed the importance of such behaviors in promoting student success. Additionally, students were found to be distracted by non-academic uses of technology, such as social media, which further impedes their focus on academic tasks (Junco & Cotten, 2012). Another troubling trend is the lack of enthusiasm and curiosity about academic subjects, as many students reported not being prepared for exams or actively seeking opportunities for academic growth. This lack of intrinsic motivation and self-reflection reflects Dweck's (2006) findings on the importance of fostering a growth mindset and continuous self-assessment. The findings highlight the need for universities to adopt more interactive teaching methods, encourage proactive student behaviors, and address digital distractions to improve overall engagement and academic success.

The study identified factors contributing to low academic engagement among university students in Rwanda. A significant factor contributing to low engagement is the perception that university students place less importance on obtaining a degree. This trend suggests that students may no longer view higher education as a critical pathway to success, possibly due to changing job market dynamics and increasing access to alternative career paths. As Arum and Roksa (2011)

noted, the value of a degree is increasingly questioned in favor of practical skills, pointing to the need for universities to adjust their curricula to better align with market demands. Another key factor is the lack of optimism regarding job prospects after graduation. Many students express concerns about their employability, which undermines their motivation to engage fully with their studies. This aligns with research by Jackson (2018), which found that students' perceptions of post-graduation job opportunities are closely linked to their academic engagement. To address this, universities must work with industry stakeholders to ensure that curricula are aligned with the skills needed in the job market. Additionally, excessive use of social media has been identified as a major distraction, which negatively impacts students' academic focus. Studies like those by Kirschner and Karpinski (2010) have highlighted how social media usage can reduce attention spans and hinder academic performance. Promoting digital literacy and strategies to manage technology use is essential to improving academic engagement. Finally, the lack of enforcement of university rules and the perception of diminished rigor among faculty and administrators were highlighted. Weak institutional policies and reduced academic standards can contribute to disengagement. Universities should prioritize stronger policy enforcement and faculty development to uphold academic rigor and improve student engagement.

The study identified several effective strategies for improving academic engagement among university students. Among the most highly regarded interventions were mentorship programs, career counseling services, and academic advising, all of which received strong support from students. Mentorship, in particular, was highlighted for its positive impact on student motivation and success, aligning with research that shows mentors provide essential guidance and foster a sense of belonging (Tinto, 2013). Similarly, career counseling services are seen as crucial for helping students navigate career paths, set goals, and align their academic efforts with future employment opportunities (Fouad et al., 2016). Strengthening academic advising further supports student retention and performance, as personalized guidance improves students' academic journey and well-being (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Other effective strategies included the incorporation of digital literacy workshops to help students manage technology use and the introduction of innovative teaching methods that promote active learning. These approaches are backed by research showing that digital literacy skills can mitigate distractions and enhance academic outcomes (Bennett et al., 2008), while active learning strategies increase student engagement and participation (Prince, 2004). The study also emphasized the importance of strict academic rules to foster accountability and discipline, which can enhance student commitment and performance (Beattie et al., 2017). Finally, optimizing the use of social media in the classroom was seen as a potential way to enhance academic engagement by turning a distraction into a learning tool. Overall, these findings suggest that a multidimensional approach is needed to improve academic engagement effectively.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study successfully provided valuable insights into the state of academic engagement among university students in Rwanda, identified the root causes of disengagement, and suggested effective strategies for improvement. The study found a concerning trend of disengagement, characterized by frequent class absences, lack of participation in academic activities, and underutilization of support services, which highlights the need for universities to foster greater academic involvement through interactive teaching methods and proactive student participation. The research also identified several root causes of low engagement, including students' diminished perception of the value of a degree, concerns about employability after graduation, excessive use of social media, and weak enforcement of academic policies. Finally, the study recommended strategies such as mentorship programs, career counseling, academic advising, and digital literacy workshops, all of which received strong support from students and are shown to positively influence academic motivation and success. Additionally, promoting active learning and better managing technology use, including leveraging social media as a learning tool, were identified as effective ways to improve student engagement. Overall, the findings suggest that a multidimensional approach, combining curriculum adjustments, improved student support systems, stricter academic policies, and innovative teaching methods, is essential to enhancing academic engagement and success in Rwandan universities.

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