

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Education in China has become one of the government's top priorities in efforts to improve the quality of human resources. The Chinese government has continuously implemented various reforms and policies to strengthen its education system. One such policy is the The 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030) (Kuhn, 2026). This policy focuses on promoting high-quality development and Chinese modernization through technological innovation, industrial upgrading, stronger domestic consumption, environmental sustainability, and improved public welfare. The plan emphasizes achieving greater self-reliance in strategic technologies such as artificial intelligence and semiconductors, strengthening economic and national security, advancing green development, and enhancing education, healthcare, employment, and social services to support China's long-term development goals toward 2035.

The successful implementation of the Outline of China's National Plan for Medium- and Long-term Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020) depends heavily on the success of learning. To achieve the successful learning, students' engagement becomes a very influencing factor. In general, student engagement means active participation in both academic and extracurricular activities with a strong commitment to reaching learning goals (Hilliard, 2015).

When students are interested in their study, they usually spend more time and effort to achieve better results. Furthermore, in the Chinese education context, student engagement has a very important meaning because education in China highly values discipline, hard work, and academic excellence (Geng & Wei, 2023).

Guided by *suzhi jiaoyu* policy, the education system is encouraged the development of students' overall abilities rather than only exam performance (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Pan and Yao (2023) supported this idea by stating that Chinese students are expected to take part not only in classroom learning but also in extracurricular and community activities that help improve their moral, intellectual, and social development.

To obtain an initial understanding of learning engagement in the Chinese educational context, a preliminary study was conducted from March to April 2025 involving English major students from three colleges under China New Higher Education Group Limited (hereafter referred to as College A, College B, and College C). Although all three institutions belong to the same educational group, there are some differences in their academic and learning environments as shown in Table 1.1

Table 1.1
Comparison Between School

School	Student-Teacher Ratio	Social Practice and Internship Opportunities	overseas study and exchange	experimental training	laboratory opening hours
A	22:1	2.45	0.22	4.00	4.05
B	19:1	1.65	0.30	3.7	3.7
C	18:1	1.65	0.32	4.05	4.05

Table 1. 1 presents the level or availability of each institutional indicator, as indicated by numerical values. Higher values suggest better availability or stronger institutional support for the relevant educational resources and learning opportunities. It compares three colleges (A, B, and C) based on several indicators related to educational resources and practical learning opportunities, including the student–teacher ratio, social practice and internship opportunities, overseas study and exchange opportunities, experimental training, and laboratory opening hours. Although the three colleges shared similar curricula and course types, they differed in several institutional characteristics, as shown in Table 1.1.

Recent studies had also discussed the learning engagement among Chinese students. Glass and Westmont (2014) conducted a cross-cultural comparative study and reported that students with extensive international experiences exhibited greater language confidence and higher academic engagement compared to those lacking such exposure. In other study, Pan and Yao (2023) who studied 298 undergraduate students found that teacher support and teacher–student rapport exert a tremendous influence on boosting Chinese students’ academic engagement.

The findings from preliminary study and empirical evidence suggest that the factors influencing students’ learning engagement go beyond internal factors. This is in line with the results of a study conducted by Ji and Li (2025) who identified how external factors such as the school management could influence the learning process including students’ engagement. At the same time, sociocultural factors, may influence students’ motivation and confidence as believed by Zajda (2024).

The early findings provide an important note for us. Those are 1) a unified educational system does not always produce equal learning outcomes, 2) differences in institutional practice and cultural background can lead to unequal engagement among students. This situation shows the need to study more deeply how institutional factors and sociocultural context influence learning engagement among English majors. Understanding these effects will help improve teaching quality, promote student participation, and support fair and balanced development across campuses within the same educational group.

1.2 Problem Identification

The problem identification is presented as follows

1. Although the three universities belong to the same educational group, preliminary observations indicate that students have different level of learning engagement.
2. Factors such as family expectations, peer relationships, cultural values, and socioeconomic background may affect how students access, utilize, and benefit from institutional resources.
3. Students with strong family support and positive peer relationships may be more likely to engage in academic activities and maximize institutional learning opportunities.
4. There is limited research examining the combined influence of institutional factors and sociocultural context on learning engagement, particularly among English majors within universities under the same educational group in China.

1.3 Limitation of the Problem

In this study, several problem limitations need to be highlighted

1. This study is limited to examining the influence of institutional factors and sociocultural context on learning engagement among English majors in three colleges under the China New Higher Education Group.
2. The institutional factors investigated are limited to course-related factors, teaching and assessment, and the university environment.
3. The sociocultural context examined is limited to community service, student organization and overseas or extracurricular language learning that may influence students' learning engagement.
4. The quantitative phase is limited to examining the individual and combined effects of institutional factors and sociocultural context on students' learning engagement.
5. The qualitative phase is limited to exploring students' and teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding institutional factors and sociocultural context within their respective campus environments.
6. The participants are limited to English major students and teachers from the three selected colleges under the China New Higher Education Group.
7. The findings are specific to the selected institutions and, therefore, may not be generalizable to all universities or English major students across China.

1.4 Research Questions

1. Is there any effect of institutional factors on learning engagement among English majors in three colleges of the same educational group?
2. Is there any effect of sociocultural context on learning engagement among English majors in three colleges of the same educational group?
3. Is there any simultaneous effect of institutional factors and sociocultural context on learning engagement among English majors in three colleges of the same educational group?
4. How do students and teachers describe the institutional and sociocultural factors that influence learning engagement in their campus environment?

1.5 Research Objectives

Based on the research questions, this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the effect of institutional factors on learning engagement among English major students in three colleges within the same educational group.
2. To investigate the effect of sociocultural context on learning engagement among English major students in the three colleges.
3. To analyze the simultaneous effect of institutional factors and sociocultural context on learning engagement, in order to understand their combined influence on students' engagement levels.

4. To explore students' and teachers' perspectives on how institutional and sociocultural factors influence learning engagement within their respective campus environments.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study falls into two aspects:

1. Theoretical Contribution

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of learning engagement theory by incorporating two important dimensions that are often studied separately. This study aims to extend the understanding that learning engagement is not only influenced by individual psychological factors, but also could be strongly influenced by social environment and education system. The findings of this study have the potential to add to the literature on learning engagement with a cross-contextual perspective, in particular, in the context of higher education in China.

2. Practical Contribution

Practically, this study is expected to provide input for higher education institutions, particularly those under the same educational group. The findings of this study can help institutional leaders and lecturers in designing policies, learning strategies, and academic support programs that are more appropriate to students' needs and take into account their socio-cultural backgrounds.

1.7 Research Novelty

Existing studies tend to examine institutional factors and sociocultural contexts in isolation rather than as combined influences, resulting in a fragmented

understanding of student learning engagement. In addition, prior research has largely relied on single-method approaches, which limit the ability to capture both the patterns and underlying mechanisms of engagement.

This study offers several key contributions to the research on learning engagement.

1. This study examines differences in learning engagement among colleges within the same educational group, providing a new perspective on intra-group variation rather than traditional comparisons between different types of universities.
2. This study integrates institutional environment theory and sociocultural theory into an organization–culture–behavior framework to explain how institutional and sociocultural factors jointly influence students' learning engagement.
3. This study employs a controlled multi-case mixed methods approach by combining survey data from the China College Student Survey (2024) with semi-structured interviews, enabling both statistical analysis and an in-depth understanding of students' experiences.
4. This study provides evidence-based recommendations for improving institutional management, teaching support systems, and student engagement strategies within centralized higher education systems.