Engaging practices: Revisiting an ethnographic study of Chinese students in Australian higher education

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This paper examines how Chinese business students engage with their studies in an Australian regional university. Drawing on an eighteen month longitudinal ethnographic study involving four undergraduate participants in a Business faculty, the study reconceptualises student engagement as engaging practices: dynamic, relational and continually evolving processes shaped by students' personal histories, sociocultural contexts, and institutional conditions. Guided by a post-Cartesian, practice-based theoretical framework (Hager et al., 2012, Nicolini, 2013), data were generated through ethnographic methods including formal and informal interviews conducted in Mandarin, classroom observations, group discussions, document analysis. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Analysis identifies four modes of engaging—career driven intensive study, individualised immersive learning, socially pragmatic networking, and efficiency focused strategies, that students enacted in response to shifting academic and social demands. The study contributes a practice-based reconceptualisation of engagement that challenges deficit views of "Chinese learners" and foregrounds the embodied, affective, and sociomaterial dimensions of participation. The findings offer practical implications for curriculum design, pedagogy and institutional support, suggesting that attention to everyday practices and feedback relationships can strengthen international students' participation and sense of belonging in Australian higher education.

Introduction

Student engagement remains a central concern in higher education, particularly as universities respond to increasingly diverse and mobile student populations. International students now make up a significant proportion of enrolments worldwide, yet questions persist about how they participate in learning and how institutions can meaningfully support their engagement. Chinese students form the largest international cohort in many English-medium systems, including Australia (Australian Government Department of Education, 2025; Xu, 2025). Understanding their engagement requires moving beyond enrolment statistics and deficit framings to examine the everyday practices through which students participate, adapt, and make sense of learning in higher education (Xu, 2019).

Research has documented a range of challenges experienced by Chinese international students, including unfamiliar pedagogical approaches (Heng, 2021; Xu & Keevers, 2022), transitional difficulties (Qu & Forsey, 2024), acculturation stress (Jiang & Xiao, 2024), language barriers (Ebel, 2024; Sawir, 2005), and social dislocation (Marginson, 2012; Montgomery, 2010). These challenges are often intensified by mismatches between Western pedagogical expectations and students' prior learning cultures, shaping how they participate, communicate and interpret academic norms (Cruickshank et al.,

2012; Volet & Ang, 2012). Studies across diverse contexts show that Chinese students' engagement practices are frequently misrecognised within participation oriented teaching models, leading to deficit interpretations of silence, feedback preferences, and classroom behaviours (Dangeni, 2025). More recent work highlights that Chinese students enact diverse, agentic, and often invisible forms of engagement that fall outside dominant Western frameworks, underscoring the need for better nuanced, practice based understandings of how they navigate learning environments (Xiao, 2025).

Within this landscape, student engagement has become a key framework for understanding and improving international students' learning experiences. Engagement is widely positioned as a mechanism for enhancing academic success, persistence, and belonging (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Trowler, 2010; Trowler et al., 2022). Yet empirical evidence shows that international students may remain overwhelmed despite investing substantial time and effort in their studies. Engagement takes multiple forms, and for many international students, engaging becomes a struggle when confronted with unfamiliar teaching practices, opaque academic procedures, and institutional "languages" that feel alien Krause (2005). These insights highlight the importance of examining how engagement is conceptualised and enacted, particularly for Chinese international students whose practices may not align with dominant Western expectations.

Despite extensive research, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how Chinese international students' engagement practices are shaped by the interplay of personal histories, sociocultural contexts, and institutional structures, particularly within regional university settings that are under-represented in the literature (Wu, 2015; Xu, 2025; Xu & Stahl, 2023). Existing frameworks have been critiqued for over-relying on participation-oriented modules that marginalise non-Western modes of engagement (Gourlay, 2015) and for neglecting the sociomaterial and affective dimensions of student practice (Fenwick & Landri, 2012).

My study addresses this gap by examining how Chinese business students, the largest disciplinary cohort within this mobility flow, engage with their studies in an Australian regional university. It asks:

> What do the lived experiences of Chinese students reveal about the engagement practices that support and/or hinder their learning?

This article advances three contributions. First, it reconceptualises engagement as engaging: ongoing, relational practices shaped by students' histories, languages, and sociocultural contexts, thereby moving beyond existing sociometric and individual-level frameworks (Kahu & Nelson, 2018) to foreground practice as the unit of analysis. Second, it draws on practice-based perspectives to foreground the embodied, affective, and sociomaterial dimensions of participation, extending prior practice-based studies of Chinese students' learning (Xu, 2019 by re-analysing this dataset to focus on specifically on engagement as engaging practices, rather than learning practices more broadly, and by explicitly conceptualising quietness, hesitation, and non-verbal participation as forms

of engaging rather than absences from it. Third, it argues that recognising multiple engaging practices can help educators and institutions move beyond deficit-oriented approaches to international student engagement.

Drawing on an eighteen-month qualitative study within a Business faculty at an Australian regional university, I offer longitudinal insights into how Chinese students navigate learning in Australian higher education, and identify implications for curriculum design, pedagogy, and institutional support.

Learning theory approaches to understanding Chinese international students' engagement

Research over several decades has examined the challenges Chinese-speaking students encounter when transitioning into Western higher education systems (Watkins & Biggs 2001; Heng, 2019; Xu, 2019). These studies highlight difficulties related to unfamiliar pedagogical approaches, expectations of independent learning, language demands, and sociocultural adjustment. To situate the present study within broader theoretical debates, this article draws on Hager et al.'s (2012) meta-analysis of learning, which identifies three paradigms: cognitive psychological, sociocultural, and post-Cartesian. These paradigms offer a useful structure for understanding how Chinese international students engage in practice.

Cognitive psychological approaches

The cognitive psychological paradigm conceptualises learning as an internal, individual process involving mental acquisition, information processing, and skill development (Hager et al., 2012). Early research on Chinese students often drew on this paradigm, interpreting their learning behaviours through assumptions about cognitive styles, motivation, or surface versus deep approaches (Watkins & Biggs 2001). Such work frequently characterised Chinese students as "rote learners" or "passive," reinforcing binary contrasts between "Chinese" and "Western" learners (Clark & Gieve, 2006; Watkins & Biggs, 1996). These interpretations have since been critiqued for cultural stereotyping and deficit framings that locate challenges within students rather than within institutional structures (Heng, 2019; Xu, 2022). While this paradigm identified useful variables, its reductive tendencies highlight the need for more holistic approaches.

Sociocultural approaches

The sociocultural paradigm shifts attention from individual cognition to the social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape learning (Hager et al., 2012). Studies adopting this perspective emphasise how Chinese students' engagement is influenced by prior educational experiences, family expectations, peer networks, and the cultural norms embedded in Western classrooms (Heng, 2021; Li & Middlemiss, 2022; Xu, 2022). Tan (2011) drawing on Shaules' (2007) concept of deep culture, highlights how hidden

assumptions, such as linguistic relativity and culturally shaped cognitive processes, inform Chinese students' learning perspectives. This paradigm has been valuable in challenging essentialist interpretations and foregrounding the relational, contextual nature of engagement.

Post-Cartesian approaches

Post-Cartesian approaches move beyond dualisms such as mind/body, individual/context, and cognition/action (Hager et al., 2012). These perspectives critique scholarship that locates engagement differences at the individual level and simplifies cultural differences through abstraction. They highlight how learning and engagement are often framed within Orientalist discourse, where the "West" is positioned as modern and liberating, contrasted with an "unenlightened" or "deficient" "Rest" (Clark & Gieve, 2006; Watkins & Biggs, 1996). This results in deficit narratives about Chinese learners. More recent work encourages attention to diversity, relationality, and cross cultural understanding (Hong et al., 2023). A further strand conceptualises learning and engagement as complex, dynamic practices emerging through interactions among people, objects, spaces, histories, and institutional arrangements (Hager et al., 2012).

Theoretical positioning and conceptual framework

Engagement is conceptualised as emerging through the interaction of student histories and aspirations, sociomaterial environments, and engaging practices (sayings, doings, relatings), framed through a post-Cartesian lens.

This study adopts a post-Cartesian lens to examine how Chinese business students enact diverse engaging practices across academic, social, and institutional contexts. This perspective enables a nuanced understanding of engagement as relational and emergent, shaped by students' histories, aspirations, and interactions with the sociomaterial environment of Australian higher education. Critically, this study delineates its contribution from existing frameworks. Unlike Kahu and Nelson's (2018) psychosocial model, which conceptualises engagement as an interface between student and institution, this study treats engaging as practised, something students do, rather than something they possess. In contrast to sociometric approaches that quantify participation frequencies or rely on survey-based indices of engagement (Trowler, 2010), it foregrounds the texture, affective dynamics, and sociomaterial conditions of students' everyday practices. Moreover, extending prior practice-based research on Chinese students' learning (Xu, 2019), it brings quietness, hesitation, and non-verbal modes into view as constitutive forms of engagement rather than absences from it. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework underpinning the study.

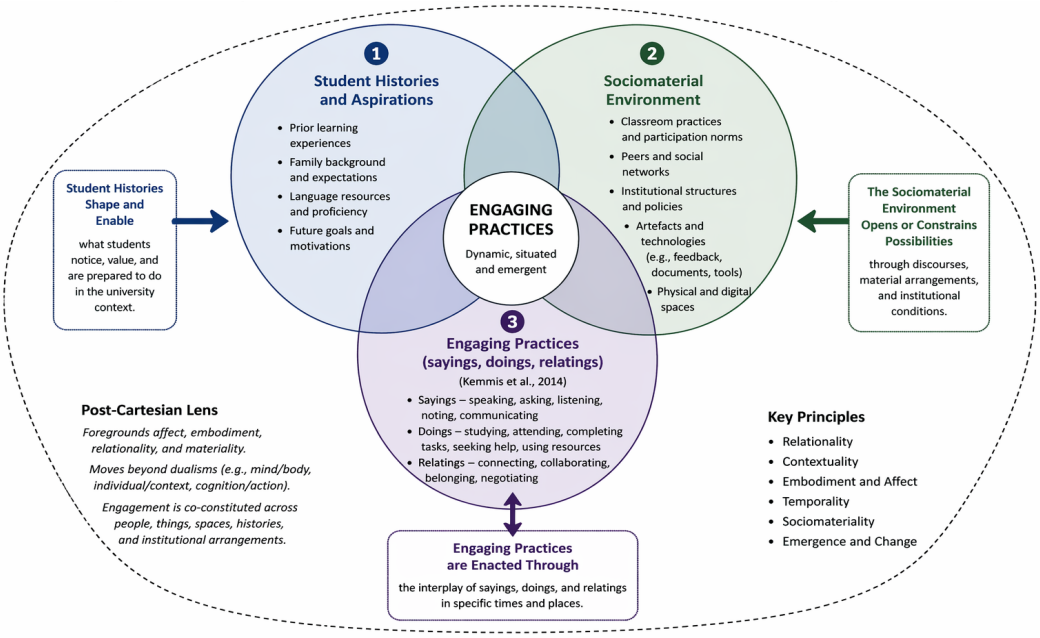

Figure 1: Conceptual framework: Engaging practices as sociomaterial configurations. (Use web or PDF reader 'zoom in' function to read.)

Methodology

Research design

The study draws on Nicolini's (2013) practice methodology, which provides flexible tools for examining complex social phenomena. Practice approaches view learning as dynamic and continually shaped by students' prior experiences, movements, and transitions. Rather than treating phenomena as discrete, practice theory emphasises relationality: phenomena "always exist in relation to each other, produced through a process of mutual constitution" (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1142). Kemmis et al. (2014) conceptualise practices as configurations of sayings, doings, and relatings involving people, material artefacts, and sociocultural arrangements. This framing illuminates the complexity of student learning and how it is continually reshaped through assemblages of personal histories, family influences, peer interactions, institutional structures, and sociocultural contexts.

Guided by this orientation, the study employed ethnographic methods to investigate the engaging practices of Chinese background students in an Australian university's Business faculty. Ethnography enables close attention to lived experience, embodied participation, and the sociomaterial conditions through which engagement emerges. It is particularly suited to capturing subtle, often invisible practices that shape international students' participation. Data collection included observations, semi-structured

interviews, discussion groups, and the gathering of artefacts, following interpretive ethnographic principles outlined by Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2006).

Research context and participants

The research was conducted in the Business faculty of an Australian regional university. Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in a Bachelor of Commerce program, undertaking subjects such as finance, accounting, and economics. Students aged 20–23 were recruited from this program. Ethics approval was obtained prior to data collection (HE14/079).

As an intensive pilot study for a PhD project, the research involved a small cohort of four students purposely selected to provide in-depth qualitative insights into their learning experiences over time. Purposive selection criteria included: enrolment in the same Business faculty cohort, diversity in prior educational background (both 2+2 joint program pathways and direct entry), and variation in gender and duration of prior English study. These criteria enabled comparative analysis of how different personal and academic histories shaped engaging practices. The longitudinal design spanning 18 months across three semesters, enabled repeated interviews and observations, generating rich temporal data on evolving practices that would not be possible with a larger sample. The duration figures reported in Table 1 reflect how long each student had already been living in Australia before commencing the Bachelor of Commerce program, time spent completing bridging English programs or other pre-degree preparation and indicate the degree of prior acclimatisation each participant brought to the study context.

Table 1: Participant information

Pseud-onym	Age	Gender	Academic background	Family background	Duration in Australia	Selection rationale
Ting	20	Female	High school + 12-week English for Tertiary.	Parents work in high school	9 months	Direct-entry; limited prior English instruction
Lin	21	Male	Diploma in Business in China (2+2 joint program)	Parents work in banking	7 Months	Male participation, banking family background
Chuchu	20	Female	Two years in a 2+2 joint program	Parents work in the universities	10 months	Academic family background; high institutional engagement
Su	23	Female	International Business (2+2), 18-week English for Tertiary study	Father runs a business; Mother does not work	7 months	Entrepreneurial background; socially oriented

Note. Duration in Australia refers to participants' residence in Australia before commencing the Bachelor of Commerce. The 18-month fieldwork refers to ethnographic data collection conducted during their Bachelor of Commerce studies across three academic semesters.

Fieldwork commenced at the start of the degree program and ran across three full academic semesters, capturing each participant's learning trajectory from the beginning of their BCom studies. Working with four cases allowed for detailed comparative analysis while maintaining the analytical manageability required for deep ethnographic engagement. This approach prioritised depth over breadth, producing thick description and nuanced understanding of the complex, shifting nature of engaging practices.

Data collection

Fieldwork was conducted over eighteen months across three academic semesters. Data were generated through multiple ethnographic sources, including formal and informal interviews with students and academics, classroom observations, group discussions, documents and artefacts, and reflective field notes. This combination enabled close attention to how students engaged with academics, peers, institutional structures, and social networks throughout their learning trajectories.

Interviews were conducted in Mandarin to ensure participants could articulate their experiences fluently and confidently. Repeated formal interviews were conducted across the study period, typically on a weekly basis during teaching semesters, with each interview lasting 60 minutes. These were supplemented by informal follow-up conversations via phone or *WeChat* to clarify field notes and deepen emerging insights. Translation samples were checked by participants and reviewed by a third-party translator to ensure accuracy and preserve meaning across languages.

Classroom observations were conducted during tutorials, lectures, workshops, and in library settings, focusing on students' verbal and non-verbal participation, positioning within the classroom, interactions with peers and instructors, and use of material artefacts (e.g., laptops, lecture slides, textbooks, and notebooks). Each observation session was documented through detailed fieldnotes written immediately following the session. Across the 18-month fieldwork period, observations were conducted regularly across multiple subjects, typically lasting approximately one hour per session, generating a substantial body of longitudinal observational data.

Group discussions were facilitated informally, bringing together two or more participants to reflect on shared experiences. These sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Documents and artefacts included assignment feedback, course outlines, student notes, and *WeChat* message exchanges shared by participants with consent. Reflective fieldnotes were maintained throughout the study to document observations, contextual details, and the researcher's ongoing interpretations.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Analysis proceeded through six iterative phases: (1) familiarisation through repeated reading; (2) initial coding based on text-based meaning patterns; (3) inductive development of abstract codes to generate preliminary themes; (4) reviewing themes in relation to coded

extracts and the full dataset to produce a thematic "map"; (5) refining and naming themes to identify clusters of engaging practices; and (6) writing up findings. To illustrate theme development: initial codes such as "avoids speaking in tutorials"; "works through problems alone", and "fears embarrassment in class" were grouped into a broader abstract code "strategic quietness", which was subsequently refined into the theme "quietness as affective and protective practice". This process was applied iteratively across all data sources, with emerging themes tested against the full dataset.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout to account for the researcher's positionality and interpretive influence. As a researcher with Chinese heritage and experience of Australian higher education, the author brought insider knowledge of the cultural and linguistic dynamics described by participants. This positionality enabled rapport and depth of access but also required ongoing critical reflection to avoid over-identification or confirmation bias. Following Glas & Soedirgo's (2024) distinction between reflexivity as self-reflection and epistemological critique, the researcher critically examined how positionality and interpretive assumptions shaped analytic decisions. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the fieldwork and analysis phases, with emerging interpretations shared with the supervisory team for peer debriefing. These processes supported the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

This section presents the findings across two levels: first, four individual pathways of engaging enacted by each participant; second, cross-case themes that illuminate patterns across participants. Together, these findings demonstrate the multiplicity of engaging practices and challenge singular or typological accounts of Chinese international student engagement.

Four pathways of engaging

This section presents four pathways of engaging enacted by Chinese business students at an Australian regional university. Each pathway reflects a distinctive configuration of practices shaped by personal histories, aspirations, sociocultural backgrounds, and institutional conditions. Together, they illustrate the diverse strategies students employ to navigate their studies.

Academic career-oriented engagement: Chuchu

Chuchu's pathway was strongly shaped by her upbringing in an academic family. With both parents working as university professors in China, academic life was normalised from an early age. She described deciding to pursue postgraduate study while still in high school, influenced by parental expectations and the competitive job market in China.

Chuchu attended all lectures, viewed attendance as essential, and pursued an exceptionally demanding schedule by completing her bachelor degree while simultaneously undertaking the Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) program. Her daily routine involved extensive study, participation in student associations, and active use of campus resources such as the library, gym, and academic support services. Among participants, Chuchu was regarded as the "model student."

Chuchu articulated the relationship between her academic habits and her family environment clearly: "My parents always talked about academic work at dinner… I just grew up thinking that studying hard and setting long-term goals is what you do." (Gd 4–5). Her sociomaterial engagement was equally distinctive: she was the only participant to regularly use library study rooms, attend PASS sessions, and connect with postgraduate students through residential activities. Classroom observations confirmed her as consistently attentive, note-taking, and willing to contribute to discussions in mixed-cohort settings.

Her pathway illustrates a highly structured, future-oriented form of engaging in which academic, social, and institutional resources are integrated into a coherent trajectory toward professional success.

Intensive immersive engagement: Ting

Ting enacted a deeply immersive and individualised approach to study. She preferred working independently and did not initially see value in discussing questions with classmates. Her descriptions of completing assessments—working for an entire day without breaks—highlight her intense focus and self-discipline. Ting attributed her capacity for sustained concentration to 11 years of Guzheng practice. "Practising Guzheng means you sit for hours without moving… I think that trained me to focus. University study feels the same." (Int T7:4).

This embodied discipline enabled her to sit still for long periods, maintain focus, and engage in reflective thinking. Her study practices were shaped by well-rehearsed habits of perseverance and attentiveness developed long before university. Ting's pathway illustrates how engaging practices can emerge from embodied histories that predate higher education and continue to shape learning in transnational contexts. Her engagement was characterised by depth, stillness, and a strong sense of personal responsibility.

Pragmatic, socially oriented engagement: Su

Su enacted a pragmatic and socially oriented pathway shaped by her interpersonal strengths and entrepreneurial aspirations. Confident and comfortable in large groups, she readily participated in class discussions and formed friendships with ease. She often described herself as someone who "likes to play," signalling her preference for social interaction over sustained academic focus. Su's learning was explicitly future-focused. She consistently evaluated academic content in terms of its practical relevance for her

goal of running a business. "I always think, will I use this when I open my own company? If not, I focus less." (Int S3:6). She positioned herself in contrast to peers who devoted most of their time to study, emphasising that academic work was only one part of her life.

Balancing academic and social commitments sometimes created tensions. Su maintained close contact with business partners in China, often through *WeChat*, which reduced the time available for study. At times, social commitments took precedence over academic responsibilities, such as submitting an exam early to meet a friend.

Su's pathway highlights a pragmatic form of engaging in which academic work is integrated into, and sometimes subordinated to, broader social and entrepreneurial aspirations. Her practices illustrate how engagement can be shaped by future-oriented goals, relational networks, and competing temporal demands.

Efficiency-driven engagement: Lin

Lin enacted a pathway of engaging centred on efficiency, aiming to achieve satisfactory academic outcomes with minimal time and effort. He described struggling with the continuous assessment structure in Australian higher education, which contrasted sharply with the exam-focused system he experienced in China. "In China, everything depends on the final exam… Here you have assignments every week. It is hard to keep up." (Int L3:2). The requirement to complete multiple assessments across the semester demanded sustained attention and frequent task switching, prompting him to develop new forms of time management and study organisation.

Pedagogical differences also shaped Lin's approach. While he viewed the content in both systems as similar, he perceived the Chinese curriculum as more complex and demanding, often requiring students to navigate "traps" embedded in exam questions. In contrast, he found Australian assessments more straightforward and appreciated the transparency of expectations. These institutional and pedagogical differences informed his strategic approach to study.

A central feature of Lin's pathway was his commitment to conserving time and energy. He deliberately avoided casual employment, viewing it as incompatible with academic success, and focused only on tasks that directly contributed to assessment outcomes. His "selective negligence" strategy—completing assessment questions but skipping ungraded tutorial work—reflected a pragmatic form of engaging shaped by institutional logics and his desire to maximise efficiency. While this approach may surprise lecturers expecting students to complete preparatory work, it demonstrates how students strategically navigate competing demands within unfamiliar pedagogical systems.

Cross-case theme: Quietness, hesitation, and non-verbal engagement

Across the four pathways, students' engagement with teaching practices varied significantly, shaped by language, logic, affect, and classroom dynamics. A recurring

pattern involved the use of quietness, hesitation, and non-verbal participation as part of their engaging practices. Although participants rarely described these behaviours as "silence", their accounts revealed strategic decisions to remain quiet in tutorials, avoid asking questions, or rely on written rather than verbal communication.

For Ting and Lin in particular, quietness functioned as a way to manage linguistic uncertainty, protect themselves from embarrassment, and maintain control over their learning. Su's selective participation and preference for written feedback similarly reflected a quieter mode of engagement. These practices demonstrate that silence was not absence, but an active, situated response to the sociolinguistic and relational dynamics of the classroom. Rather than signalling disengagement, quietness emerged as a meaningful and protective strategy within unfamiliar pedagogical environments.

Silent engagement as embodied and affective practice: Ting

Ting's pathway illustrates how engagement can be deeply embodied, affectively charged, and shaped by classroom belonging. Her lecturer described her as visibly stressed and hesitant to participate in discussions, while fieldnotes captured her stillness and isolation as the only Chinese student in the tutorial. Although she appeared socially disengaged, Ting was intensely engaged in individual, habitual practice.

Ting explained that asking questions in class involved "two layers of problems"—language and logic. She feared that unclear questions might waste others' time or expose her to embarrassment, leading her to remain silent and work through problems independently. Her silence was therefore a protective strategy shaped by linguistic, logical, and social pressures. Ting's pathway highlights how engagement can be enacted through quiet, embodied practices that are often overlooked within participation-oriented teaching models.

Strategic silence and the economy of explanation: Lin

Lin also encountered challenges when engaging in discussions with domestic students, leading him to adopt silence as a strategic practice. He described the cognitive and linguistic labour required to participate in English-medium discussions:

> It is a different language, and the ways of thinking are different… If I say something, most of the time they do not understand, and I will have to interpret it again… So, I found it is better not to talk more in the beginning. (Int L2:3)

For Lin, silence was not disengagement but a calculated response to the effort required to explain himself across linguistic and cultural boundaries. His pathway reflects an "economy of explanation", in which he weighed the time and energy required to participate against other academic priorities: "I might spend double more time, getting half results with double efforts." (Int L5:4)

Lin's strategic silence illustrates how engagement can be shaped by the desire to conserve cognitive resources within unfamiliar pedagogical environments.

Socially oriented engagement and the need for explicit guidance: Su

Unlike Ting and Lin, Su struggled with individual study and relied heavily on Chinese peers for academic and emotional support. She expressed concern about her essay writing skills and the limited feedback she received: "The tutor did not mention what I had missed… The feedback should be more detailed… pointing out what I needed to go deeper to explain." (Int S5:2)

Due to language difficulties, Su found written feedback more helpful than verbal explanations: "If there is something important, it's better to have notes on the whiteboard." (Int S2:2)

Her note-taking was selective, focusing only on what she perceived as essential :"I did not write down the detailed parts." (Int S2:2). She contrasted her approach with Ting's meticulous reading and summarising: "I read the book in detail… I will compare these with lecture notes and do a summary." (Int T12:4). Lin also valued detailed written comments but felt more confident seeking clarification outside tutorials: "Those detailed comments are very useful… It needs to be clearly pointed out… This should be given with the comments in the first place." (Int L5:3)

Su's pathway highlights how engagement can be shaped by the need for explicit guidance, linguistic scaffolding, and social learning structures.

Classroom composition, communication, and belonging

Classroom allocation significantly shaped students' engaging practices. Ting initially welcomed being the only Chinese student in her tutorial but later described discomfort and disorientation: "At first, I thought it was awesome… After a while, I found it was not that awesome… They talked very fast and used slang… I was completely lost." (Int T4:11)

For Ting, Lin, and Su, fast-paced discussions, unfamiliar slang, and implicit norms constrained their willingness to contribute. Engagement was enhanced when students felt a sense of belonging, recognised their strengths, and were acknowledged as legitimate participants in group discussions (Zepke, 2013). These findings point to the structural dimensions of engagement: classroom composition policies that disperse international students into isolated positions within domestic cohorts, often intended to promote integration, may inadvertently amplify affective discomfort and constrain participation. Neoliberal university enrolment logics, which prioritise throughput and revenue over relational learning conditions, can thus reproduce the very engagement deficits they purport to address.

Engaging through Chinese student associations and social networks

All participants engaged with social networks to support their learning and build connections. For three students, Lin, Su and Ting, this included attending sessions of the Chinese Commerce Academic Development (CCAD) program, a bilingual, peer-led initiative supporting Chinese students in accounting and finance.

Conducted primarily in Mandarin, CCAD helped students overcome language barriers and reinforced understanding of subject content in both Chinese and English (Bowering et al., 2007). Lin valued learning in a familiar linguistic environment: "The key is the classes are conducted in Chinese; therefore, there is no language barrier for me… The CCAD leaders explain the key concepts in very simple and plain Chinese." (Int L6:3)

The use of Mandarin and culturally familiar examples created a space where students could engage without fear of misunderstanding, enabling a sense of belonging within a supportive learning community (Montgomery, 2009). Ting described how CCAD helped her grasp conceptual relationships:

> [CCAD] helps me to know the internal relationship between the concepts… The teacher often asks, 'Do you know why?'… Then he showed the relationships step-by-step, till we understood. (Int T3:5)

Su selectively attended sessions led by teachers she felt best supported her learning: "Before I went to Sunny's class, I felt I was in the clouds… then I felt there was a clear path in front of me after the CCAD workshop." (Int S10:7) She valued the use of diagrams and conceptual linking: "Sunny uses diagrams to show their relationship… He is very good at linking the concepts… after he discussed them, they become clear to me." (Int S6:7). Lin similarly appreciated CCAD leaders' ability to distil core ideas: "Joe summarised and connected the links from the two topics… It helped me discover some concepts I still did not understand." (Int L10:5).

CCAD thus served both academic and social functions, providing a culturally familiar environment where students could ask questions freely, share materials, and build relationships with peers facing similar transitions. Lin described how institutional structures shaped his need for such networks: "I must find new friends each session… Connecting with other Chinese students and communities is an easy option." (Int L9:5)

In contrast, Chuchu built her social network through student clubs and university accommodation. She described how joining a social club helped her form connections: "The social club offers lots of activities… I've met so many people, and it really helps me release pressure… If I only studied without doing other activities, I think I'd go mad." (Gd 4–5)

Through club activities, Chuchu met students with diverse academic backgrounds, including PASS leaders and postgraduate students, who became informal sources of academic and social support. Her experience illustrates how learning can occur through

social participation and shared living arrangements, fostering belonging, connection, and informal learning.

Discussion

Engaging practices rather than engagement

This study reconceptualises student engagement as engaging practices: dynamic, relational, and continually evolving processes inseparable from learning and change. Rather than viewing engagement as an innate trait or an essentialist characteristic tied to race, culture, or nationality, the findings show that engaging is an active, situated process through which students navigate the transition from Chinese to Australian higher education. Aligned with post-Cartesian perspectives that foreground embodied, relational, and sociomaterial practices (Hager et al., 2012), the analysis demonstrates that engagement comprises multiple, sometimes contradictory practices shaped by students' histories, aspirations, and institutional encounters.

Across the four pathways, students enacted diverse forms of engaging. Ting and Lin struggled with conversational participation and relied on quiet, individualised strategies; Su enacted socially oriented, pragmatic engagement; and Chuchu engaged across academic, sociocultural, and institutional domains. Although students did not explicitly label their practices as "silence", quietness, hesitation, and non-verbal participation emerged as central modes of engaging shaped by linguistic, affective, and relational dynamics. Importantly, these practices were continuous with prior learning in China. While teachers often oversimplify these continuities as rote memorisation, the findings reveal nuanced trajectories. Ting emphasised individual discipline; Su and Lin drew on relational and social practices. Practices were not fixed but emergent, adapting to sociomaterial assemblages (Fenwick & Landri, 2012). Even apparent disengagement may represent alternative modes of engaging.

Ting and Lin's quietness functioned as an effective strategy, aligning with Gourlay's (2015) critique of pathologising East Asian silence. What may appear as passivity is better understood as affective engagement — a practice of coping, positioning, and belonging. Students' practices were mutually constitutive: "doings" (study practices), "sayings" (asking questions, clarifying), and "relatings" (connections with peers, teachers, staff, and family) co-produced engaging practices (Kemmis et al., 2014). These practices embed movement and change, continually becoming (Jullien, 2009; Langley et al., 2013). Ting's reluctance to ask questions limited her access to dialogic support but protected her from discomfort. Su's playful social interactions created a relaxed mode of participation, while Chuchu's use of institutional services expanded her networks and sense of belonging.

These findings advance the existing literature in several ways. First, they extend Xu's (2019) practice-based study of Chinese students' learning by demonstrating that non-participation: quietness, hesitation, strategic silence, constitutes a form of practice rather than an absence of practice. Second, they complement Dangeni's (2025) account of

invisible engagement among Chinese students in the UK by providing longitudinal, multi-method evidence of the affective and embodied conditions that produce such invisibility. Third, they challenge Kahu and Nelson's (2018) model by showing that the "interface" between student and institution is not merely psychosocial but sociomaterial: classroom composition, enrolment sequencing, and institutional language hierarchies are practices that shape what engaging looks like and who is recognised as engaged.

The ambiguity of "engagement" is therefore not a weakness but a reflection of the messy realities of learning (Vuori, 2014). Students' practices resist typological categorisation. Ting's inexperience in "asking questions", "joining in", or "interrupting" restricted her access to communication practices that produce belonging, yet her solitary study practices were effective. Lin's strategic silence represented affective engagement, demonstrating how quietness can coexist with persistence and adaptation. These examples show how engaging practices are entangled, contradictory, and constantly shifting across sociomaterial assemblages. Overall, this reconceptualisation challenges mainstream approaches that treat engagement as a measurable, typological construct. By foregrounding engaging practices, the analysis demonstrates how students' learning is constituted through everyday actions, affective strategies, and relational networks. Engagement is not a static attribute but a continual process of becoming, shaped by prior experiences, sociocultural contexts, and institutional structures.

Power, inequality, and structural constraints

While the findings foreground student agency, they also illuminate structural conditions that constrain and enable engaging practices. The Australian regional university context is characterised by particular neoliberal logics: internationalisation as revenue generation, English-only classroom norms as default, and semester-by-semester enrolment patterns that fragment the relational continuity students need to build engaging networks. These are not neutral administrative arrangements, but practices saturated with power relations (Marginson, 2012).

Language hierarchies were particularly salient. Ting and Lin's strategic silence was not merely personal coping but a response to English-medium classrooms where their contributions required disproportionate cognitive effort and carried social risk. Su's preference for written feedback reflected her positioning within a linguistic hierarchy in which oral fluency functioned as a proxy for intellectual competence. These dynamics echo critical scholarship on internationalisation that identifies systemic inequalities embedded in the everyday practices of 'internationalised' universities (Marginson, 2012; Xu & Stahl, 2023). CCAD's value, from this perspective, was not simply that it provided academic support but that it temporarily suspended the dominant language hierarchy, creating a space in which Chinese students' linguistic competence was a resource rather than a liability. This points to the political dimensions of peer-led bilingual initiatives: they are not supplementary add-ons but counter-hegemonic practices within neoliberal university structures.

Pedagogical and institutional implications

The findings have several implications for pedagogy and institutional practice in internationalised higher education.

Silence as engagement
Silence or limited verbal contribution should not be misinterpreted as disengagement. Instead, silence can be a culturally informed strategy of observation, linguistic processing, and reflective learning (Bao, 2021; Wang et al., 2022). As Reda (2009) and Sedova and Navratilova (2020) argued, silence is a communicative practice through which students listen, reflect, and strategically position themselves. Recognising silence as one of many ways of engaging enables educators to move beyond deficit interpretations and design classroom practices that validate diverse modes of participation.

Feedback as dialogue
Students valued structured feedback that could be reviewed repeatedly, translated if necessary, and used to guide future work. This aligns with Boud and Molloy's (2013) argument that feedback should develop evaluative judgement. Written feedback that fosters dialogue and reflection supports deeper engagement and helps students navigate linguistic and cultural transitions (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). More recent scholarship on feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018) similarly argues that students must be supported to make sense of, and act on, feedback, a process that requires explicit scaffolding, particularly for those navigating feedback norms in a second language.

Institutional structures shape engagement

Institutional arrangements such as class allocation, group formation, assessment scheduling, are not neutral administrative processes but practices that shape students' opportunities for participation and belonging. The contrast between Chinese cohort-based systems and Australian semester-by-semester enrolment patterns created challenges for relationship building and social network formation. Universities must examine how institutional structures enable or constrain participation, recognising that engagement is produced through the interplay of pedagogical, social, and structural factors. From a critical perspective, this requires institutions to interrogate how neoliberal logics, including internationalisation as revenue and English-only defaults, reproduce inequality and constrain diverse engaging practices.

Value of peer-led bilingual support

Peer-led bilingual programs such as CCAD demonstrate the value of initiatives that respect linguistic and cultural continuities. These programs provide academic support while fostering belonging, relationality, and confidence, all central to engaging practices. They also offer culturally familiar spaces where students can ask questions freely and build conceptual understanding through shared language and examples. Critically, they

operate as counter-hegemonic spaces that challenge English-only language hierarchies and recognise students' full communicative repertoires as educational resources.

Taken together, these implications position engagement as multiplicity in motion, challenging deficit framings and affirming diverse student practices, including silence as communication and feedback as dialogue (Quin, 2017).

Conclusion

This study examined student engagement through an eighteen-month ethnography of four Chinese business students at an Australian regional university. The findings show that engagement is not a universal solution or a fixed attribute, but is better understood as engaging, dynamic, situated, and continually evolving practices enacted as students navigate complex transnational learning environments.

The diverse pathways of Chuchu, Ting, Su, and Lin challenge simplified characterisations of "Chinese learners" common in Western discourse. Their practices—career-oriented, individually immersive, socially pragmatic, and strategically efficient—were not deficient but differently configured, shaped by personal histories, family influences, educational backgrounds, and adaptive responses to new contexts. These findings highlight the importance of recognising the multiplicity of engaging practices rather than reducing engagement to a measurable trait that students possess or lack.

Reframing engagement as ongoing practice aligns with perspectives emphasising relationality, affect, and sociomaterial entanglement. Ting and Lin's strategic silence, for example, was not disengagement but a form of affective engagement shaped by linguistic and social pressures. Su's networking reflected a pragmatic, future-oriented learning strategy. Such nuanced understandings become visible only when engagement is examined through students' lived experiences rather than through simplified metrics or culturally specific expectations.

The implications for higher education are significant. Universities must move beyond deficit models and cultural stereotypes toward recognising and supporting multiple engaging practices. Pedagogical approaches should create space for diverse forms of participation, provide feedback that enables reflection, make conceptual connections explicit, and treat prior learning as a resource. Institutionally, peer-led bilingual programs such as CCAD illustrate the value of initiatives that respect linguistic and cultural continuities, while critical attention to power relations and structural inequalities, including language hierarchies, neoliberal enrolment logics, and the positioning of international students as revenue rather than community, is essential for systemic change. Accommodation and enrolment structures shape students' capacity to build sustaining relationships and networks.

Engagement is best understood as multiplicity in motion: practices that are situated, relational, and continually becoming. This reconceptualisation offers higher education a more nuanced lens for supporting international students' learning and highlights the need for pedagogical and institutional approaches responsive to the complexity of students' experiences in globalised higher education.

Future research could extend this practice-based approach to larger cohorts, varied disciplines, and diverse institutional settings. Comparative studies across national contexts may illuminate specificities of transnational educational experiences, while research examining educators' perspectives on recognising and supporting diverse engaging practices would complement this student-focused study and contribute to more comprehensive understandings of teaching and learning in internationalised higher education.

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