

# Policy Briefs for Enhancing Academic Engagement in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review

Annisa Fitria Suherman<sup>1\*</sup>, Tati Kustiawati<sup>2</sup>, Nadia Aulia Nadhirah<sup>3</sup>, Ilfiandra<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia

\*Corresponding author. Email: [annisafitria02@upi.edu](mailto:annisafitria02@upi.edu)

## ABSTRACT

The transformation of higher education demands enhanced academic engagement as a key measure of learning effectiveness and institutional resilience. However, many educational policies remain insufficiently grounded in empirical research. This study identifies and analyzes existing research on policy development as a strategic instrument to enhance academic engagement in higher education. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was employed, drawing literature from Scopus, DOAJ, and Google Scholar databases (2015-2025). Five articles meeting the inclusion criteria were analyzed, covering educational policy, transformational leadership, and academic engagement themes. Findings reveal that policy briefs serve as crucial bridges between research and practice, fostering inclusive academic climates, strengthening institutional resilience, and cultivating sustainable learning cultures. The study demonstrates that evidence-based educational leadership and participatory approaches are essential in shaping policies that promote student wellbeing and academic sustainability. Enhanced academic engagement contributes not only to improved learning outcomes but also to building adaptive and equitable higher education systems. These findings provide a foundation for developing responsive policy briefs that address digital era challenges and advance inclusive, resilient, and sustainable transformation in higher education.

**Keywords:** *Academic engagement, student wellbeing, sustainable learning, transformation leadership.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of higher education in the contemporary era demands an increase in academic engagement as an important measure of learning effectiveness and institutional strength. Academic engagement includes active student participation in the learning process, interaction with lecturers and fellow students, and commitment to achieving academic goals (Liu, 2024). This concept is multidimensional, encompassing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions that interact with each other in shaping students' learning experiences (Wenger, Russell & Kinzie, 2024). Student engagement has been positioned as a defining characteristic of high-quality teaching and learning, as this concept can serve the purposes of various stakeholders in various learning contexts, institutional management, and national policy (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015).

However, the level of academic engagement remains a significant challenge in many universities. Factors such as a perceived lack of social support, academic pressure, and the quality of lecturer-student relationships are barriers to optimal student

engagement (Liu, 2024). Recent research identifies that stress in student life, lack of support from faculty, and life dissatisfaction negatively impact student wellbeing, which ultimately affects their academic engagement (Puiu et al., 2024). Low academic engagement not only impacts students' individual achievements but also affects dropout rates, which exceed 20% in some countries, with only half of students completing their three-year degree within four years (Laranjeira & Teixeira, 2025). The urgency to address this issue is reinforced by empirical data showing a strong positive correlation between the frequency of student engagement with campus services and their retention rates, with students who engage four or more times showing retention rates of up to 92-93% (Washington, 2025). Social support significantly and positively predicts academic engagement through the mediating effects of life satisfaction and academic motivation (Chen, Bian, & Zhu, 2023), highlighting the importance of a holistic approach in understanding the dynamics of student engagement.

Although student engagement has been positioned as a defining characteristic of high-quality teaching and learning that serves various stakeholders in diverse contexts (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015), there is a critical gap between research findings and policy implementation. Many education policies are not yet fully rooted in empirical research findings that can strengthen student participation and engagement in the long term. Policy briefs serve as strategic instruments that can bridge research and policy practice, but comprehensive systematic reviews examining how policy development functions as a strategic tool to increase academic engagement in higher education are still limited. In addition, there is still a lack of synthesis on how evidence-based educational leadership and participatory approaches can be translated into actionable policy briefs to promote student welfare and academic sustainability.

This study aims to identify and analyze research findings related to policy development as a strategic instrument in enhancing academic engagement in higher education through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. By reviewing literature from the Scopus, DOAJ, and Google Scholar databases published between 2015 and 2025, this study synthesizes the latest findings on education policy, transformational leadership, and academic engagement, taking into account four main sets of factors, namely student engagement, student engagement facilitators, student engagement indicators, and the results of student engagement (Trolan, 2024).

This study aims to identify and analyze research findings related to policy development as a strategic instrument in improving academic engagement in higher education through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. By reviewing literature from the Scopus, DOAJ, and Google Scholar databases published between 2015 and 2025, this study synthesizes the latest findings on education policy, transformational leadership, and academic engagement, taking into account four main sets of factors, namely student engagement, student engagement facilitators, student

engagement indicators, and the results of student engagement (Trolan, 2024). This study contributes by presenting a comprehensive synthesis of how policy briefs can build an inclusive academic climate, strengthen institutional resilience, and foster a sustainable learning culture. The findings of this study provide a basis for higher education institutions to create a more conducive academic environment that is responsive to the challenges of the digital age and oriented towards inclusive, resilient, and sustainable higher education transformation. Increased academic engagement not only impacts individual learning outcomes but also the sustainability of a higher education system that is adaptive and equitable in the face of social and technological changes in the 21st century.

Based on the background and research gaps described above, this study answers the following research questions:

1. What are the findings in existing research related to policy development concerning academic engagement in higher education?
2. How can policy briefs serve as strategic instruments for enhancing academic engagement?
3. What roles do transformational leadership and evidence-based approaches play in shaping policies that promote student well-being and academic sustainability?

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This study uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method, a structured research synthesis approach, to identify and analyze studies related to policy development defined here as the process of creating and implementing strategic guidelines or rules as an instrument for increasing academic engagement in higher education. Academic engagement in this context refers to students' involvement and participation in their academic learning activities. SLR was chosen for its ability to provide a comprehensive, transparent, and replicable review with the aim of minimizing bias (Liu, 2024; Li & Xue, 2023). The SLR process followed the PRISMA 2020 protocol, which reflects advances in methods for identifying, selecting, assessing, and synthesizing studies (Trolan, 2024). The inclusion criteria in data collection for this article included: (1) articles published between 2015 and 2025, (2) discussing academic engagement and higher education policy, (3) published in peer-reviewed journals, (4) available in full text, (5) written in English or Indonesian, and having a clear methodology. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria included: (1) articles not relevant to higher education, (2) editorial publications or conference abstracts without full papers, (3) articles not discussing the relationship between policy and academic engagement, (4) duplicate articles, and (5) articles with low methodological quality.

The literature search strategy uses a combination of keywords grouped into three main concepts. The first concept relates to academic engagement and includes the

keywords: “academic engagement,” “student engagement,” “learner engagement,” and “engagement in learning.” The second concept relates to policy development and uses the keywords: “policy,” “policy brief,” “policy development,” “educational policy,” “institutional policy,” and “policy making.” The third concept relates to higher education and includes: “higher education,” “university,” “college,” “tertiary education,” and “postsecondary education.”

The article selection followed the four PRISMA 2020 stages. First, searches in Scopus, DOAJ, and Google Scholar found 183 articles using academic engagement, policy, and higher education keywords. After removing duplicates, 105 articles remained. Their titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, peer review status, and language (English or Indonesian). This left 28 articles for full-text eligibility checks. Twenty-three were removed for not discussing the policy-engagement relationship or lacking full text. Five articles met all criteria and were used for analysis.

I extracted data using a matrix with publication identity, research objectives, methods, sample, main findings, policy recommendations, and policy brief implications. I used a thematic approach to find patterns and key themes (Rahmani, Groot & Rahmani, 2024). I followed the six Braun and Clarke steps: familiarization, coding, making themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing the report (Apumayta et al., 2024). My analysis looked at four student engagement areas: what leads to, supports, shows, and results from engagement.

I ensured the validity of the results by keeping the process transparent, triangulating sources using multiple databases, conducting peer debriefing with higher education experts, and maintaining an audit trail for each methodological decision (Li & Xue, 2023; Laranjeira & Teixeira, 2025). My study faces several limitations: I restricted searches to three databases, focused on English and Indonesian publications, and ended up with only five final articles due to the topic’s specificity and strict criteria. Nevertheless, the selected articles offer high quality and strong relevance for developing policy briefs to improve academic engagement.

### **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### **RESULT**

Following the PRISMA protocol, we identified five articles meeting our criteria for in-depth analysis. These articles, published from 2015 to 2025, are highly relevant to current challenges in higher education, with 80% published in the past five years (2020-2025).

Three articles used a qualitative approach (case studies and policy document analysis), one used a quantitative approach (longitudinal survey), and one used mixed methods. This methodological diversity offers a comprehensive perspective on academic engagement from varied epistemological views. The following section

synthesizes results from these five articles, which met the inclusion criteria in the Systematic Literature Review (SLR), and reviews the themes of education policy, transformational leadership, and academic engagement. Thematic analysis identified four main focuses forming the basis of the policy brief: social-relational foundations, a holistic approach to engagement, pedagogical technology integration, and contextual, sustainable policies.

**Table 1.** Table of Systematic Literature Review

Author & Year	Country	Study Design	Sample/Context	Key Findings Related to Academic Engagement
Kahn (2017)	Several higher education institutions in the United Kingdom (UK)	Argumentative analysis developing a theoretical framework based on critical realism and agency theory	Higher education policy contextualized through a critical realist lens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student engagement shaped by active participation supported by social relationships.</li> <li>• Policy briefs can bridge research and practice by promoting an inclusive academic climate, institutional resilience, and a sustainable learning culture.</li> </ul>
Godsk & Møller (2025)	Higher education institutions in OECD member countries (mainly US, UK, Scandinavia)	Systematic Literature Review (SLR)	196 studies across various higher education fields	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eight educational technologies identified with engagement potential: LMS, discussion forums, audience response systems, online quizzes, social media, video/audio tools, games/gamification, VR/simulation.</li> <li>• 61 detailed recommendations proposed to optimize engagement.</li> </ul>
Linton et al. (2020)	United Kingdom (UK) higher education	Qualitative (Thematic Analysis)	15 students from diverse backgrounds (mature, ethnic minority, widening participation, postgraduate) at a Northern red brick university	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key enablers: community-building, interactive teaching, departmental support, empowerment, motivation.</li> <li>• Barriers: hierarchical structures, competing commitments, low confidence, drinking culture; mature and</li> </ul>

Author & Year	Country	Study Design	Sample/Context	Key Findings Related to Academic Engagement
Wang et al. (2025)	China	Quantitative – Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)	335 students from four universities (Education, Literature, Management)	<p>working students face specific challenges.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soft skills positively predict positive emotions and academic engagement (absorption, dedication, vigor).</li> <li>• Positive emotions significantly mediate the soft skills–engagement relationship.</li> <li>• Soft skills and emotional development are crucial for sustained academic success.</li> </ul>
Bond et al. (2020)	Global higher education (33 countries: US, UK, Australia, Taiwan, China, etc.)	Systematic Literature Review (SLR)	243 studies involving university students across disciplines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educational technology supports behavioral (86%), emotional (67%), and cognitive (56%) engagement.</li> <li>• Text-based media, knowledge-organization tools, and multimodal production tools most consistently linked to engagement.</li> </ul>

Table 1 presents five key studies that met the inclusion criteria in the systematic literature review (SLR). These studies employ diverse methodologies—ranging from theoretical analysis (Kahn, 2017), qualitative approaches (Linton et al., 2020), quantitative methods (Wang et al., 2025), to systematic reviews (Bond et al., 2020; Godsk & Møller, 2025). This methodological diversity enriches the understanding of academic engagement from multiple perspectives.

Overall, the studies consistently reveal that student engagement is strongly influenced by social relationships, institutional support, and the integration of educational technology. Emotional factors such as motivation and sense of belonging also emerge as key mediators linking educational policies with learning outcomes. Furthermore, educational technology and evidence-based policymaking are identified as strategic tools to strengthen student participation and interaction within higher education contexts.

Based on an analysis of five articles that met the inclusion criteria, this study identified eight interrelated main themes that contribute significantly to the development of evidence-based policies to improve student academic engagement.

**Tabel 2.** Table of Thematic Analysis

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Related Studies	Key Recommendations
Social-Relational Foundations of Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social relationships as drivers of autonomy</li> <li>• Community-building and sense of belonging</li> <li>• Staff-student relationships and hierarchical structures</li> <li>• Peer interaction and collaborative learning</li> <li>• Social support networks</li> </ul>	Kahn (2017); Linton et al. (2020); Bond et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build learning communities from the start of the semester</li> <li>• Implement effective peer mentoring and personal tutoring</li> <li>• Reduce unnecessary staff-student hierarchy</li> <li>• Use collaborative and interactive teaching methods</li> <li>• Create safe spaces for student voice and representation</li> <li>• Provide tailored support for mature and non-traditional students</li> </ul>
Holistic Student Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement</li> <li>• Soft skills (curiosity, persistence, flexibility, leadership)</li> <li>• Positive emotions as mediators</li> <li>• Wellbeing and resilience</li> <li>• Personal and academic identity</li> </ul>	Bond et al. (2020); Wang et al. (2025); Linton et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrate soft skills into curriculum design</li> <li>• Implement emotional wellbeing programs (mindfulness, positive psychology)</li> <li>• Support students' self-regulation and reflection</li> <li>• Address mental and physical health proactively</li> <li>• Strengthen bonding capital within and across groups</li> <li>• Develop interventions targeting multiple engagement dimensions</li> </ul>
Evidence-Based Policy Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy briefs as strategic tools</li> <li>• Critical realist perspectives</li> <li>• Research-practice gaps</li> <li>• Transparency and accountability</li> <li>• Context-sensitive policy design</li> </ul>	Bond et al. (2020); Wang et al. (2025); Linton et al. (2020); Kahn (2017); Godsk & Møller (2025)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ground policy in empirical evidence and systematic review findings</li> <li>• Use realist synthesis to identify causal mechanisms and contextual factors</li> <li>• Ensure policies reflect the complexity of engagement</li> <li>• Provide clear feedback loops showing student impact on policy</li> <li>• Design culturally and institutionally responsive policies</li> </ul>

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Related Studies	Key Recommendations
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Involve students as partners in policy-making</li> </ul>
Technology-Enhanced Learning Environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Types of educational technologies</li> <li>● LMS as structural support</li> <li>● Interactive and collaborative tools</li> <li>● Flexibility and accessibility</li> <li>● Digital literacy and technical support</li> <li>● Learning analytics</li> </ul>	Bond et al. (2020); Godsk & Møller (2025)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Choose technologies with proven engagement potential</li> <li>● Provide clear LMS structure with manageable tools</li> <li>● Use text-based tools, knowledge-organization tools, multimodal production</li> <li>● Implement audience response systems and group discussions</li> <li>● Combine synchronous and asynchronous activities</li> <li>● Ensure accessible technical support</li> <li>● Use learning analytics to detect at-risk students</li> <li>● Avoid technology use without pedagogical integration</li> </ul>
Inclusive and Equitable Academic Climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Diverse student backgrounds and needs</li> <li>● Widening participation challenges</li> <li>● Barriers for non-traditional students</li> <li>● Cultural and linguistic diversity</li> <li>● Socioeconomic factors</li> <li>● Disabilities and accessibility</li> </ul>	Linton et al. (2020); Kahn (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Address unique challenges faced by mature, working-class, and minority students</li> <li>● Provide flexible learning options for students with work/family responsibilities</li> <li>● Offer on-campus employment and paid internships</li> <li>● Train staff in diversity, equity, and inclusion</li> <li>● Develop culturally inclusive assessments and curriculum</li> <li>● Provide comprehensive disability support services</li> <li>● Avoid assumptions about the “typical” student</li> </ul>
Pedagogical and Curricular Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Active learning and student-centered approaches</li> <li>● Curriculum design and structure</li> <li>● Assessment for learning</li> <li>● Authentic and meaningful tasks</li> </ul>	Linton et al. (2020); Godsk & Møller (2025); Bond et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Design courses with clear structure and logical sequencing</li> <li>● Use varied assessments including formative and peer assessments</li> <li>● Incorporate real-world problems and authentic tasks</li> </ul>

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Related Studies	Key Recommendations
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contact hours and quality interactions</li> <li>Co-designed curriculum</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Balance lectures with interactive methods (seminars, studios, group work)</li> <li>Ensure meaningful staff–student interaction</li> <li>Include students in curriculum development</li> <li>Use higher-order thinking tasks (analysis, synthesis, evaluation)</li> <li>Provide autonomy and active roles for students</li> </ul>
Institutional Support Structures and Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Departmental culture and organization</li> <li>Staff openness and attitudes</li> <li>Information and communication systems</li> <li>Financial support mechanisms</li> <li>Relationship-centered quality assurance</li> <li>Leadership and governance</li> </ul>	Linton et al. (2020); Kahn (2017); Godsk & Møller (2025)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure accessible, visible, and supportive departmental services</li> <li>Assign reliable contact persons for student support</li> <li>Communicate regularly and transparently</li> <li>Use QA systems that assess quality of relationships and support</li> <li>Provide adequate funding for student services and engagement initiatives</li> <li>Build an institutional culture that values teaching and engagement</li> <li>Recruit diverse staff to reflect student diversity</li> <li>Apply evidence-based and transformational leadership</li> </ul>
Student Empowerment and Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Confidence and self-efficacy</li> <li>Motivation and goal-setting</li> <li>Student voice and representation</li> <li>Feedback mechanisms</li> <li>Critical reflection</li> <li>Leadership opportunities</li> </ul>	Linton et al. (2020); Kahn (2017); Wang et al. (2025)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish transparent and responsive student feedback systems</li> <li>Show students the real impact of their participation</li> <li>Provide leadership and representation opportunities for diverse groups</li> <li>Encourage critical thinking and questioning</li> <li>Support student-led initiatives and organizations</li> </ul>

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Related Studies	Key Recommendations
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Develop students' metacognitive and self-regulation skills</li> <li>● Recognize and value student contributions to institutional development</li> </ul> <p style="margin-left: 20px;">Avoid symbolic or tokenistic engagement</p>

Table 2 synthesizes eight interconnected core themes that emerged from the thematic analysis, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding policy-driven academic engagement enhancement in higher education. The first theme, social-relational foundation, emphasizes that positive relationships among students, faculty, and peers serve as the cornerstone for building inclusive academic communities where engagement can flourish. This foundation is closely intertwined with the second theme, holistic approach to student development, which recognizes that academic engagement must be understood comprehensively across behavioral, affective, and cognitive dimensions rather than as isolated observable behaviors. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing and collectively contribute to students' overall engagement experience.

The third theme, evidence-based policy development, underscores the critical importance of grounding educational policies in empirical data while carefully considering institutional contexts. Effective policies cannot be transplanted wholesale from one setting to another but must be adapted to local conditions, student demographics, and institutional capabilities. This evidence-based approach is complemented by the fourth theme, technology-enhanced learning environments, which reveals that educational technology's effectiveness in promoting engagement depends fundamentally on meaningful pedagogical design rather than the mere presence of digital tools. Technology serves as an enabler of engagement only when it supports structure, active learning, communication, and meaningful interaction among students and between students and faculty.

The fifth theme, inclusive academic climate and equity, highlights the necessity of accommodating diverse student backgrounds, experiences, and needs within both policy frameworks and teaching practices. This inclusivity extends beyond access to encompass genuine participation, representation, and support for traditionally underrepresented groups including mature students, ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, and first-generation learners. The sixth theme, pedagogical and curricular strategies, demonstrates that active and collaborative learning approaches significantly enhance student motivation and engagement by positioning students as active

participants in knowledge construction rather than passive recipients of information. These strategies must be deliberately designed and systematically implemented to maximize their engagement potential.

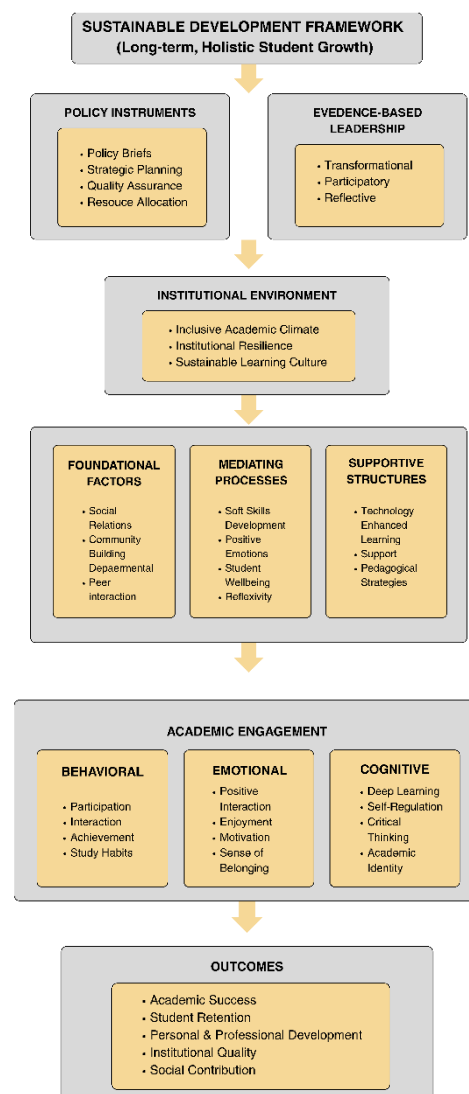
The seventh theme, institutional support structures and culture, emphasizes that supportive leadership and organizational structures strengthen the quality of social interactions and create enabling conditions for engagement to thrive. This includes accessible departmental support, approachable faculty, transparent communication systems, and institutional cultures that genuinely value teaching and student development alongside research productivity. The eighth and final theme, student empowerment and agency, recognizes that providing spaces for student voice, participation, and leadership serves as a catalyst for enhanced engagement. When students feel empowered to influence their learning experiences and contribute meaningfully to institutional decision-making, their sense of ownership and commitment to their academic work intensifies.

The interconnections among these eight themes reveal that academic engagement emerges from multidimensional interactions among social, psychological, pedagogical, and structural factors operating simultaneously at multiple levels of the higher education system. No single factor operates in isolation; rather, they function as an integrated ecosystem where changes in one dimension reverberate across others. For instance, supportive institutional structures enable faculty to develop meaningful relationships with students, which in turn facilitates the implementation of active pedagogical strategies that promote deeper engagement. Similarly, technology-enhanced learning environments become truly effective only when embedded within inclusive academic climates supported by evidence-based policies and meaningful student-faculty relationships.

The synthesis of findings from both tables leads to a critical overarching conclusion: enhancing academic engagement cannot be achieved through any single intervention, regardless of how well-designed or well-intentioned that intervention might be. Instead, what is required is a multi-level, evidence-based approach that systematically connects social relations and institutional support with contextual and inclusive policies, integrates technology with active pedagogical strategies, and positions students as genuine partners in the academic process rather than merely as recipients of services. This comprehensive approach recognizes the complexity of academic engagement while providing actionable pathways for institutional transformation.

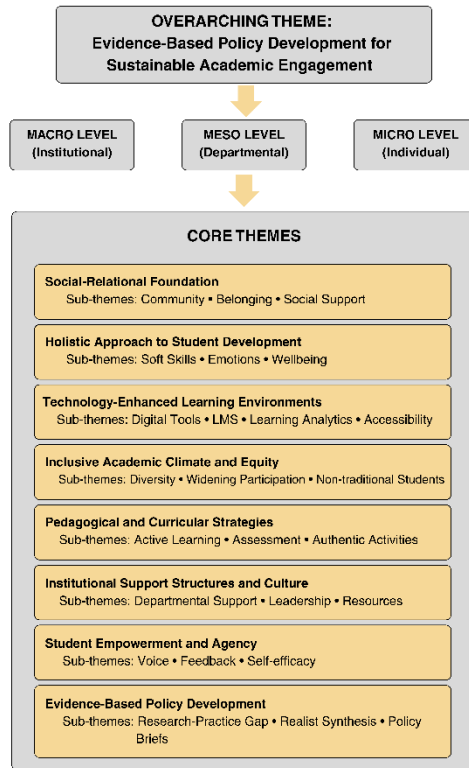
Overall, the analysis powerfully reinforces the strategic importance of policy briefs as instrumental tools for translating research findings into concrete, actionable policies that foster inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable academic climates in higher education. Policy briefs serve not merely as administrative documents but as catalysts

for systemic change, bridging the persistent gap between educational research and institutional practice. By grounding policy development in the empirical evidence synthesized in this review and acknowledging the interconnected nature of the eight core themes, institutions can move beyond fragmented, reactive responses toward coherent, proactive strategies that systematically enhance academic engagement across all student populations. This evidence-based, holistic approach to policy development represents a fundamental shift from policies focused narrowly on easily measurable outputs to those that cultivate the complex social, emotional, and cognitive conditions necessary for genuine academic engagement and long-term student success. Based on the explanation above, the following is a comprehensive visualization of the research findings.



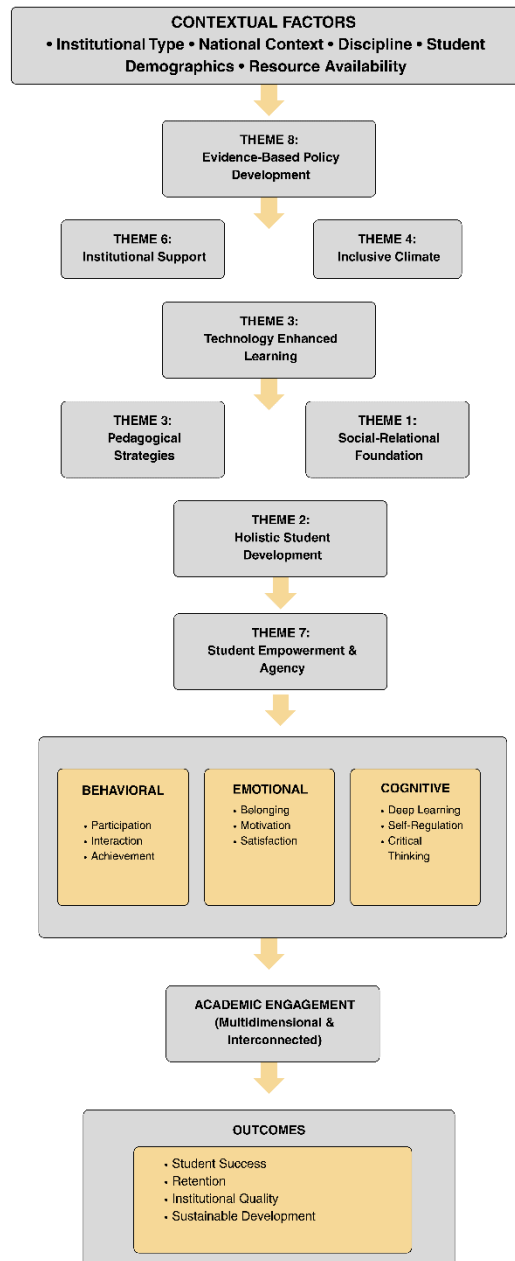
**Figure 1.** Sustainable Development Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework synthesized from the thematic analysis, showing interconnections among social-relational, technological, institutional, and policy dimensions of engagement.



**Figure 2.** Overarching Theme

Figure 2 maps the overarching themes, indicating how evidence-based leadership and inclusive academic climates collectively enhance sustainable engagement.



**Figure 3.** Contextual Factors

This framework illustrates the interconnected factors influencing academic engagement derived from the systematic review. Seven key themes—social-relational foundation, holistic student development, pedagogical strategies, technology-enhanced learning, inclusive climate, institutional support, and evidence-based policy development—operate within broader contextual factors such as institutional type, national context, discipline, student demographics, and resource availability. Academic engagement emerges as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions that interact dynamically to shape learning outcomes. These dimensions collectively foster student success, retention, institutional

quality, and sustainable educational development, emphasizing the need for coherent, evidence-based, and context-sensitive policy interventions in higher education.

## DISCUSSION

This systematic literature review synthesized evidence from five high-quality studies to examine policy development as a strategic instrument for enhancing academic engagement in higher education. The synthesis revealed eight interconnected themes that collectively provide a comprehensive framework for policy-driven engagement enhancement: social-relational foundation, holistic student development, evidence-based policy development, technology-enhanced learning environments, inclusive academic climate, pedagogical strategies, institutional support structures, and student empowerment. The findings demonstrate that academic engagement is a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, affective, and cognitive dimensions, and that effective policy development must address these dimensions simultaneously through evidence-based, contextually-sensitive approaches that prioritize social relations, student wellbeing, and institutional support structures (Bond et al., 2020; Fredricks et al., 2004).

The centrality of social relations and community building identified in this review aligns strongly with previous research on student engagement. Seminal work on student integration theory emphasized the critical role of academic and social integration in student persistence, a finding consistently supported by subsequent research (Tinto, 1993; Kuh et al., 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). More recently, a comprehensive study across multiple UK institutions found that fostering a sense of belonging through both curricular and co-curricular activities was fundamental to student success, particularly for non-traditional students (Thomas, 2012). Our synthesis extends this work by demonstrating how policy briefs can systematically translate these insights into actionable institutional strategies that strengthen social relations across multiple levels—from peer interactions to staff-student relationships and broader institutional communities.

The finding that soft skills and positive emotions serve as crucial mediators of academic engagement resonates with the growing body of research on non-cognitive factors in higher education success. A meta-analysis of 344 samples found that behavioral engagement indicators, while important, represented only part of the engagement picture, with motivational and emotional factors playing equally significant roles (Credé & Niehorster, 2012). Similarly, a systematic review of 241 studies identified self-efficacy, grade goal, and effort regulation as stronger predictors of GPA than traditional demographic variables (Richardson et al., 2012). Our synthesis contributes to this literature by showing how institutional policies can deliberately cultivate these non-cognitive competencies through structured interventions such as

soft skills development programs, emotional wellness initiatives, and supportive learning environments.

The emphasis on technology-enhanced learning environments reflects broader trends in higher education research. A comprehensive meta-analysis examining decades of online learning research found that blended learning approaches combining face-to-face and online elements produced better learning outcomes than either approach alone (Means et al., 2013). However, our synthesis adds nuance by identifying that technology's impact on engagement depends critically on how it supports structure, active learning, communication, and interaction—a finding consistent with the critique that technology per se does not improve learning, but rather the pedagogical approaches it enables (Kirkwood & Price, 2014). This underscores the importance of policy frameworks that emphasize pedagogically-informed technology integration rather than technology adoption for its own sake.

This synthesis makes several important theoretical contributions to understanding academic engagement in higher education. First, by integrating critical realist perspectives with empirical evidence on engagement mechanisms, the review advances a more sophisticated understanding of how structural factors (policies, institutional arrangements) interact with agential factors (student reflexivity, soft skills) to produce engagement outcomes (Kahn, 2017; Bond et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2025). This moves beyond deterministic models that view engagement as simply a function of student characteristics or institutional inputs, instead recognizing the complex interplay of context, agency, and social relations. This theoretical lens aligns with recent calls for more nuanced, processual understandings of engagement that acknowledge its dynamic and contextual nature (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Tight, 2020).

Second, the synthesis demonstrates the utility of applying the three-dimensional framework—behavioral, affective, cognitive engagement—to policy analysis in higher education (Fredricks et al., 2004). While this framework has been widely applied in K-12 research, its systematic application to higher education policy remains relatively underdeveloped (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Our review shows how this framework can guide policy development by ensuring that interventions address multiple dimensions of engagement simultaneously, rather than focusing narrowly on easily observable behavioral indicators. This multidimensional approach is particularly important given evidence that the three dimensions are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, suggesting that policies targeting one dimension may have spillover effects on others (Wolters & Taylor, 2012).

For institutional leaders and policymakers, this review provides an evidence-based roadmap for developing policies that systematically enhance academic engagement. The identification of eight core themes offers a structured framework for conducting institutional audits to identify strengths and gaps in current engagement

support systems. Universities can use this framework to develop comprehensive policy briefs that address multiple levels simultaneously—from macro-level strategic planning and resource allocation to meso-level departmental support structures and micro-level pedagogical practices. Importantly, the review emphasizes that effective engagement policies must be grounded in local contexts while drawing on broader evidence bases, consistent with principles of realist evaluation that emphasize context-mechanism-outcome configurations (Pawson, 2013).

For academic staff and educational developers, the synthesis highlights the critical importance of creating inclusive learning environments characterized by strong social relations, active pedagogies, and meaningful student-staff interactions. The finding that hierarchical structures can impede engagement suggests the need for professional development that helps faculty develop more facilitative, student-centered teaching approaches (Linton et al., 2020). Similarly, the evidence on technology's engagement potential underscores the importance of supporting faculty in developing technological pedagogical content knowledge rather than simply providing access to educational technologies (Bond et al., 2020; Godsk & Møller, 2025; Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Institutions might consider establishing teaching and learning centers that provide ongoing support for evidence-based pedagogical innovation, as recommended in principles of good practice in the scholarship of teaching and learning (Felten et al., 2013).

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. First, the review's focus on publications from 2015 to 2025 and restriction to specific databases (Scopus, DOAJ, Google Scholar) may have excluded relevant earlier work or research published in other outlets. While this approach ensured contemporary relevance and included the most recent research on post-pandemic higher education, it may have missed foundational studies that could provide additional historical context. Second, the small number of included studies ( $n=5$ ), while reflecting the specificity of our research question and rigorous inclusion criteria, limits the generalizability of findings across different institutional types, national contexts, and disciplinary areas. The included studies were predominantly from Western, English-speaking countries (UK, USA, Australia, China), potentially limiting applicability to other cultural and educational contexts. Third, the heterogeneity of research designs across included studies—ranging from large-scale systematic reviews to small qualitative studies—while providing complementary insights, makes direct comparison and synthesis challenging. Finally, our reliance on published research may reflect publication bias favoring studies with positive findings, potentially overlooking interventions that were unsuccessful in enhancing engagement.

Several promising directions for future research emerge from this synthesis. First, there is a need for more longitudinal studies examining how policy interventions affect

academic engagement over time, including an investigation of potential delayed effects and the sustainability of engagement gains. Most existing research, including studies in this review, relies on cross-sectional or short-term designs that cannot capture the developmental trajectories of engagement or identify critical periods for intervention. Second, comparative research examining engagement policies across diverse institutional contexts—including different countries, institutional types (e.g., research-intensive versus teaching-focused universities), and disciplines—would help identify which policy elements are universally effective versus context-dependent. Such research could employ realist evaluation methodologies to systematically map context-mechanism-outcome configurations (Pawson, 2013). Third, more research is needed on the engagement experiences of underrepresented groups, including international students, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, and first-generation students, to ensure that policy development truly promotes inclusive excellence. Fourth, given the rapid evolution of educational technologies, particularly generative AI, ongoing research is needed on how emerging technologies can be leveraged to support engagement while mitigating potential risks such as reduced authentic interaction or increased academic integrity concerns. Finally, there is a need for implementation science research examining the processes by which evidence-based engagement policies are translated into actual practice, including investigation of barriers and facilitators to policy adoption, adaptation, and sustainability within complex higher education organizations.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study answers three research questions through a systematic synthesis of five high-quality articles. First, policy development to improve academic engagement focuses on: (1) building social-relational foundations, (2) adopting holistic student development, (3) advancing technology-based learning, (4) promoting inclusive academic climates, (5) enhancing pedagogy and curricula, (6) strengthening institutional support, (7) empowering students, and (8) using evidence-based policy. Second, policy briefs bridge research and practice by offering operational recommendations that: (1) build inclusivity, (2) boost institutional resilience, and (3) foster sustainable learning. Third, transformational leadership and evidence-based approaches are crucial; they (1) strengthen social relations, (2) develop soft skills and positive emotions, and (3) create environments supporting behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement.

This study makes a theoretical contribution by integrating critical realism and the three-dimensional framework of engagement to guide higher education policy development. Practically, it delivers a comprehensive framework that institutions can use to audit and systematically enhance engagement policies. Key findings show that

alignment with the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy supports active participation, collaboration, and student autonomy. Research-based policy briefs thus serve as catalysts for inclusive, resilient, and sustainable higher education. Specifically, greater academic engagement improves individual learning outcomes and strengthens the adaptability and equity of higher education systems for 21st-century challenges.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was conducted as part of academic activities at the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia. We extend our sincere thanks to Dra. Tati Kustawati, M.Pd., Nadia Aulia Nadhirah, M.Pd., and Prof. Dr. Ilfiandra, M.Pd., for their supervision and guidance throughout this research. Special appreciation goes to fellow researchers and colleagues at the Guidance and Counseling Department for their valuable insights and constructive discussions. We are grateful to the organizing committee of the 6th International Conference on Educational Research and Development (ICERD) for providing the platform to present this work. Our thanks also extend to anonymous peer reviewers whose feedback strengthened this manuscript. Finally, we acknowledge the original authors of the five high-quality studies synthesized in this review, whose contributions to the field of academic engagement and policy development made this synthesis possible. The authors declare no conflict of interest in this research.

## REFERENCES

- Apumayta, R. Q., Cayllahua, J. C., Pari, A. C., Choque, V. I., Valverde, J. C. C., & Ataypoma, D. H. (2024). University Dropout: A Systematic Review of the Main Determinant Factors (2020-2024). *F1000Research*, 13, 942.
- Ashwin, P., & McVitty, D. (2015). The meanings of student engagement: Implications for policies and practices. In A. Curaj, L. Matei, R. Pricopie, J. Salmi, & P. Scott (Eds.), *The European Higher Education Area* (pp. 343–359). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20877-0\\_23](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20877-0_23)
- Bond, M., Buntins, K., Bedenlier, S., Zawacki-Richter, O., & Kerres, M. (2020). Mapping research in student engagement and educational technology in higher education: A systematic evidence map. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 17(1), 2. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-019-0176-8>
- Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2025). Why Focus on Student Engagement? Retrieved from <https://cccse.org/about/why-focus-student-engagement>
- Chen, C., Bian, F., & Zhu, Y. (2023). The relationship between social support and academic engagement among university students: the chain mediating effects of life satisfaction and academic motivation. *BMC Public Health*, 23(1), 2368.
- Colorado Department of Education. (2025, January). 2023–24 Dropout Data Release Summary. Denver, CO: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/dropoutcurrent>
- Credé, M., & Niehorster, S. (2012). Adjustment to college as measured by the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire: A quantitative review of its structure and relationships with correlates and consequences. *Educational Psychology Review*, 24(1), 133–165. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-011-9184-5>
- Felten, P., Kalish, A., Pingree, A., & Plank, K. M. (2013). Toward a scholarship of teaching and learning in educational development. *To Improve the Academy*, 32(1), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2334-4822.2013.tb00683.x>

- Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(1), 59–109. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001059>
- Godsk, M., & Møller, K. L. (2025). Engaging students in higher education with educational technology. *Education and Information Technologies*, 30, 2941–2976. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-024-12901-x>
- Hari Rajan, M., Herbert, C., & Polly, P. (2024, January). Disrupted student engagement and motivation: observations from online and face-to-face university learning environments. In *Frontiers in Education* (Vol. 8, p. 1320822). Frontiers Media SA.
- Kahn, P. E. (2017). Higher education policy on student engagement: Thinking outside the box. *Higher Education Policy*, 30(1), 53–68. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-016-0031-7>
- Kirkwood, A., & Price, L. (2014). Technology-enhanced learning and teaching in higher education: What is 'enhanced' and how do we know? A critical literature review. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 39(1), 6–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2013.770404>
- Kuh, G. D., Cruce, T. M., Shoup, R., Kinzie, J., & Gonyea, R. M. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(5), 540–563. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2008.11772116>
- Laranjeira, M., & Teixeira, M. O. (2025). Relationships between engagement, achievement and well-being: validation of the engagement in higher education scale. *Studies in Higher Education*, 50(4), 756–770.
- Li, J., & Xue, E. (2023). Dynamic interaction between student learning behaviour and learning environment: Meta-analysis of student engagement and its influencing factors. *Behavioral Sciences*, 13(1), 59.
- Linton, S. R., Bailey, J., Nagouse, E., & Williams, H. (2020). What helps students to engage with the academic environment? *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, 3(1), 7–31. <https://sehej.raise-network.com/raise/article/view/904>
- Liu, X. (2024). Effect of teacher–student relationship on academic engagement: the mediating roles of perceived social support and academic pressure. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1331667.
- Loyola-Carrillo, P., Vega-Muñoz, A., Salazar-Sepúlveda, G., Gil-Marín, M., & Adsuar-Sala, J. (2025). Studying engagement in educational settings: a mapping review on high-impact academic engagement research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, 1519509.
- Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., & Baki, M. (2013). The effectiveness of online and blended learning: A meta-analysis of the empirical literature. *Teachers College Record*, 115(3), 1–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811311500307>
- Mishra, P., & Koehler, M. J. (2006). Technological pedagogical content knowledge: A framework for teacher knowledge. *Teachers College Record*, 108(6), 1017–1054. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9620.2006.00684.x>
- Modern Campus. (2025). Unpacking Student Engagement within Higher Education. Diakses dari <https://moderncampus.com/blog/student-engagement.html>
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research* (Vol. 2). Jossey-Bass. [Book - Available through major academic libraries]
- Pawson, R. (2013). *The science of evaluation: A realist manifesto*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473913820>
- Puiu, S., Udriștioiu, M. T., Petrișor, I., Yılmaz, S. E., Pfefferová, M. S., Raykova, Z., ... & Marekova, E. (2024, July). Students' well-being and academic engagement: a multivariate analysis of the influencing factors. In *Healthcare* (Vol. 12, No. 15, p. 1492). MDPI.
- Rahmani, A. M., Groot, W., & Rahmani, H. (2024). Dropout in online higher education: a systematic literature review. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 21(1), 19.
- Reschly, A. L., & Christenson, S. L. (2012). Jingle, jangle, and conceptual haziness: Evolution and future directions of the engagement construct. In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly, & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 3–19). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7_1)
- Richardson, M., Abraham, C., & Bond, R. (2012). Psychological correlates of university students' academic performance: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 138(2), 353–387. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026838>

- Szabó, L., Zsolnai, A., & Fehérvári, A. (2024). The relationship between student engagement and dropout risk in early adolescence. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 6, 100328.
- Thomas, L. (2012). Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: Final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme. Paul Hamlyn Foundation. [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/what\\_works\\_final\\_report.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/what_works_final_report.pdf)
- Tight, M. (2020). Student retention and engagement in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(5), 689–704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1576860>
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press. [Book - Available through major academic libraries and <https://press.uchicago.edu>]
- Trolian, T. L. (2024). Student engagement in higher education: Conceptualizations, measurement, and research. In *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research: Volume 39* (pp. 265-324). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- University of Houston. (2025, April 30). Student Engagement Yields Results: Data Shows Strong Link Between Involvement and Success. Division of Student Affairs. Retrieved from <https://www.uh.edu/dsa/news/2025/student-engagement-yields-results-data-shows-strong-link-between-involvement-and-success.php>
- Wang, X., Deng, X., Wan Jaafar, W. M., Sulong, R. M., Zainudin, Z. N., & Wan Othman, W. N. (2025). Fostering academic engagement through soft skills and positive emotions: A sustainable development perspective on university education. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, 1622327. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1622327>
- Wang, Y., & Zhang, W. (2024). The relationship between college students' learning engagement and academic self-efficacy: a moderated mediation model. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1425172.
- Washington, G. (2025, April 30). Student Engagement Yields Results: Data Shows Strong Link Between Involvement and Success. Division of Student Affairs, University of Houston. Diakses dari <https://www.uh.edu/dsa/news/2025/student-engagement-yields-results-data-shows-strong-link-between-involvement-and-success.php>
- Wenger, K., Russell, A., Kinzie, J. (2024). A friendly guide to student engagement. National Survey For Student Engagement.
- Wolters, C. A., & Taylor, D. J. (2012). A self-regulated learning perspective on student engagement. In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly, & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 635–651). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7\\_30](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7_30)