

# **The Student Engagement Enigma – The Psychosocial and Academic Trust Alienation Theory: A new theoretical lens to investigate Higher Education student phenomena**

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## **Abstract**

Currently, Higher Education (HE) is experiencing post-pandemic challenges which have increased pressure on HE students in multifaceted and interconnecting ways. Existing HE research suggests that post-pandemic, students' mental health and wellbeing has been significantly impacted, thus indicating that proactive research into the field of HE students is needed now more than ever before. This article presents the new concept of the Psychosocial and Academic Trust Alienation (PATA) theory as a lens through which HE student behaviours, characteristics, and demographics can be researched. It begins with an explanation of the PATA theory with links to student engagement enigmas, and then explores how this theory can be applied to researching the complexities of student demographics, with the aim being to develop knowledge and understanding of issues affecting students such as post-pandemic engagement. Furthermore, an analysis into the potential range of research methods that can be employed and utilised in HE practice is also presented, supported by three case vignette examples with key reflection points. A critical analysis and debate of this emerging educational theoretical perspective is presented with a concluding statement on the impact of how this theory can support researchers examining the complexities of the HE student community, the HE Institutional and HE political landscapes, on a national and international level.

**Key Words:** Higher Education; Student Engagement; PATA Theory; Alienation; Trust

## INTRODUCTION

Higher Education (HE) is undergoing post-pandemic challenges which have increased pressure on HE students in multifaceted and interconnecting ways (Jones & Bell, 2024). Existing research suggests that post-pandemic, student's mental health and wellbeing is significantly impacted thus implying that research into the field of HE students is needed more urgently than ever before (Chen & Lubock, 2022; Defeyter et al., 2021; McGiven & Shepherd, 2022; Nunn et al., 2021). In addition, as the HE research community is growing in size and diversity, this brings to the forefront the need for new approaches to conducting research, particularly in terms of student behaviours, characteristics and demographics. Currently there is considerable research in the form of critique of policy trends or evaluation of the effectiveness of changes in practice; however, the Psychosocial and Academic Trust Alienation (PATA) theory lens lays forth a fresh approach to research centring on the educational psychologies and intricacies of the HE student and the enigma of student engagement (Buckley, 2018; Jones & Nangah, 2020; McFarlane & Thomas, 2017). Additionally, the PATA theory makes a substantive contribution to the development of HE research by focusing attention on critical student issues, and is duly aligned to a wide range of research methods and approaches.

### *What is the PATA Theory?*

The PATA theory is positioned under the umbrella of 'alienation' theory and seeks to explain the phenomena of barriers to student engagement within HE (Jones, 2021). More specifically, the PATA theory suggests that an individual student's self-concept and self-esteem (psychosocial), can affect a student's trust in their educational abilities, systems, and establishments (see Figure 1). If there are large discrepancies between a student's self-concept and self-esteem levels, this can interfere with the student's ability to trust in the educational systems, thus affecting engagement (Jones, 2023; Jones, 2021; Jones & Nangah, 2020). It is harder for these students to complete their programmes of study as they alienate themselves and pull away from their education because they may have lost trust in either the systems, the staff, themselves, or the taught content. In addition, education systems can contribute to alienation of students via assessment and central services practices (Jones, 2023), denoting that alienation can be owned by the student themselves or enforced by the

practices of the educational systems within which they are placed. Engagement can be additionally affected further by world events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Below explains the multi-layers of the PATA theory, covering alienation, student engagement, psychosocial (self-concept, self-esteem) and trust in more detail.

According to Çağlar (2012; 2013) alienation is evidenced when students display negative attitudes towards their educational experiences and towards the institution. These attitudes impact on institutions being able to achieve their overall objectives, and further highlights that middle and higher education are most affected by this notion of alienation (Tezcan, 1997 cited in Çağlar, 2012). Çağlar (2012, p195-96) further asserts that alienation is evidenced by ‘...moving away from herself/himself [student], and from productions [education], and from natural, social, psychological and cultural environment...’, with which the student has control or where they can assert their power according to their own feelings of alienation. Çağlar’s (2012; 2013) ideas of alienation provide a natural pathway to the assertion that these negative student attitudes create barriers to learning and student engagement, they also prevent institutions from achieving their overall goals and educational objectives. Therefore, it is in the best interests of both the student and the institution to attempt to investigate these issues and try to find solutions.

It would be practical at this stage to explore the psychosocial terminology in more detail. According to Howe (cited in Walker & Crawford, 2010, p28), the concept of psychosocial theory is, ‘created by the interplay between the individual’s psychological condition and the social environment’. Howe (cited in Walker & Crawford, 2010, p28) adds: ‘the term psychosocial describes an approach that considers both the individual psychology and the social context of people’s lives on their individual development’. Schaffer (2000, p159) further reinforces this idea by explaining that self-concept influences humans based on their experiences, particularly when relating accomplishment and failure with feelings of aptitude or ineffectiveness. Self-concept is coupled to self-esteem which can be associated with an individual’s feelings of his or her own merit and is explained by Schaffer (2000, p164) as:

the evaluative aspect of the self-system is related to the image of an ideal self that we all have: where there is little discrepancy between the ideal and the

perceived real self, the individual will experience high self-esteem; where the discrepancy is great, on the other hand, low self-esteem is the result.

Those students who have had a large gap from education, have English as an additional language, previously gained low attainment grades from school or experienced disadvantage and hardship (Vignoles & Murray, 2016; Jones & Nangah, 2020), potentially present with gaps between the 'ideal self and the perceived self' impacting on their progress within the HE environment. This is mainly because of the academic assessment requirements which need to be met, and where students have vast gaps in academic knowledge, processes, and expectations coupled with the effects of their life experiences, many of the students start their academic studies with a discrepancy between their '...ideal self and perceived self...' (Schaffer, 2000, p164). This can then breed low self-concept and self-esteem across the institution, suggesting that these students are further disadvantaged as the gaps between their '...ideal self and perceived self...' (Schaffer, 2000, p164) can already be significant from the outset. It would appear sensible to assume that low self-concept and self-esteem can create barriers to engagement through alienation based on this notion (Mann, 2001; Jones, 2021; 2023; Jones & Nangah, 2020).

Schaffer (2000) goes on to consider that humans self-concept can range from low to high, with the ability to move up or down in reaction to changing behaviours, and the appraisal of the extent of their own failed experiences as a consequence of their own set standards. For example, students' self-esteem depends considerably on the individual self-concepts and how they are able to adjust their own self-concept in response to their HE experience. The suggestion of an interchangeable continuum leads to an assumption that there is scope for the student's self-concept to be increased or decreased dependent on their own view of themselves, but also in response to the assessment by others. This idea further relates with the psychosocial idea of self-concept in terms of trust.

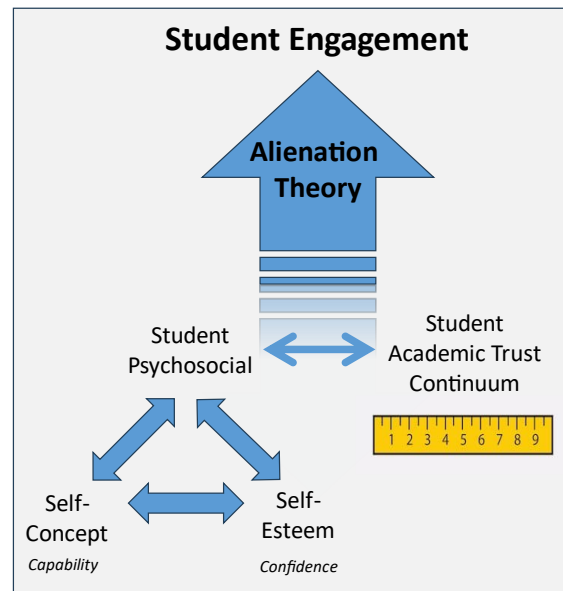
Erikson (1995, cited in Walker & Crawford, 2010) developed the idea that when trust is established, individuals are able to feel secure, even when feeling under threat. However, if the stage of 'trust versus mistrust' is unsuccessfully completed then this can result in an inability to trust and can create a sense of fear about what is seen as

the contradictory world. According to Walker and Crawford (2010, p28), 'this can result in anxiety, increased insecurities and an over feeling of mistrust in the world...', and is categorized as a crisis stage. Successful progress through this first stage of development (trust versus mistrust) could lead students to positive outcomes with healthy and ongoing development being achieved. However, if the stages of trust are not successfully achieved then this can lead to students feeling alienated based on their own individual self-concept and self-esteem (psychosocial). Knowledge of this notion could enable institutions to consider the power of the relationship between the internal world of the student and the social environment in which they are positioned as part of their programmes of study.

Trust is considered as a two-way exchange between students' and the institution; (Lee et al., 2019) it is acknowledged that academic trust can change or differ in response to various points of the students HE experience and the students' individual psychosocial status. According to Baier (1991, p110), 'Trust is a notoriously vulnerable good, easily wounded and not at all easily healed'. This acknowledges the importance of trust, but also the fragility of trust which could very easily lead to feelings of alienation and barriers to student engagement (Baier, 1991). Therefore, it is in the best interests of the student and the institution to foster trustful relationships to reduce barriers to student engagement through academic trust related alienation theory, especially for the diversity of the student market (Avery, et al., 2021; Parris, et al., 2015). The PATA theory connects the multilayers of a student's psychosocial and academic trust alienation status to find patterns that are influencing or affecting student success in the HE domain.

The PATA theory also suggests that students with smaller disparities between self-concept and self-esteem (psychosocial) generally present with higher levels of academic trust and thus present with positive engagement levels (see Figure 1) (Jones, 2021; 2023). This demonstrates that for these students, progression and achievement is more stable and successful. The ultimate goal for any Higher Education Institution (HEI) is to enable students to progress and succeed so that they can go on to be able to apply for future job roles and contribute to society in the wider context (Advance HE, 2023; HESA, 2023). However, supporting the breadth of student diversity in the HE sector is typically not straight forward or simplistic. The PATA theory

is a complex idea applied to a complex range of student issues, but when the phenomenon is understood well, there is the potential to really make a difference to the educational outcomes of students. Using this theory as a lens would enable researchers to gain stronger knowledge to develop insight into the current issues experienced.



**Figure 1. Diagram of the PATA Theory (Jones, 2021; 2023)**

As explained, the following elements of the PATA theory are interconnected but can be researched in isolation to identify patterns, relationships, correlations and connections.

- (1) Alienation theory;
- (2) Psychosocial (Self-concept/Self-esteem);
- (3) Academic trust.

*How can the PATA theory lens be positioned within research contexts?*

The PATA theory lens can be applied to student behaviours, characteristics, and demographics in HE, by utilising the available and appropriate research tradition methodologies and approaches that seek to explain the phenomenon of barriers to student engagement affiliated to concepts of alienation. This is important because, as

mentioned earlier, there are many challenges that HE students are experiencing such as personal, professional, academic, wider societal and world influences which can potentially affect their psychosocial status and thus impact on their ability to engage, succeed and progress through their programmes of study (Jones & Nangah, 2020; Jones & Bell, 2024).

Additionally, the PATA theory lens can be applied to HEI research where there is clear evidence of elevated levels of academic trust within student populations, demonstrated by high levels of student engagement (Jones, 2021), thus demonstrating that the PATA theory is applicable in any context. Equally this phenomenon provides a basis for enquiry to identify key HE practices that are improving student engagement and can be shared across the HE research community.

Currently, existing theories do not make the connections and associations between a student's psychosocial status and the links to academic trust, so knowledge of the PATA theory could contribute to a stronger understanding of student phenomena for differing HE institutional demographics by building empirical evidence-based knowledge for the wider HE research community. It provides a new approach to research phenomenon which, if used effectively, would provide a rich depth to any student based phenomenological research study, particularly in relation to those around student engagement. Furthermore, use of the PATA theory in practice could help to address many of the reasons why students leave their HE studies early, or alternatively why some HEIs perform better in relation to student engagement. This would enable HEIs to develop practice, share knowledge across the community and to develop bespoke support strategies, influencing macro, meso and micro levels (Haas & Hadjar, 2020, p1106, Fig.1), such as campaigning for change in Government policies, updating institutional policies and teaching and learning practices to meet the needs of their student demographics.

## **THE PATA THEORY LENS APPLIED TO RESEARCH OF HE STUDENT PHENOMENA**

The PATA theory lens can be applied across disciplines and is not restricted to specific students on specific courses or within specific HE areas or programmes of study. It can be applied to any institution, in any country, with any kind of diversity of demographic, financial systems or political landscape. In terms of conducting research, this opens up a wide range of possibilities with flexibility in application. The only requirement is that the research is applied to students within HE or indeed education (Jones, 2023). As explained earlier there is significant need for more research across HE focusing on students, and in terms of HEI leadership and strategic planning, the PATA theory lens provides an opportunity for educators to consider the individual needs of their students. In relation to HEI strategic planning, this approach aligns with transformational leadership and management tendencies which look deeper than student voice activities and embrace innovation. However, to achieve this, evidence-based research is needed that is bespoke to each individual HEI system or demographic.

### *Student Engagement*

It is important to acknowledge that the term 'student engagement' can vary within the field of HE depending on focus, for example from the perspective of a student, an academic, HE teacher or the institution itself (Bokhove & Muijs, 2018). Guidelines from the QAA (2018) state that due to the demographic of the students who attend each institution, student engagement needs to be interpreted and practised in response to student/HEI need. Student engagement can be interpreted in a variety of ways, such as, the links between time, energy and other properties invested by HEIs and students with the aims of cultivating the student experience, strengthening educational outcomes, encouraging development and raising student achievement (Trowler, 2010; Trowler & Trowler, 2010). It could also be interpreted as, the extent to which HE students engage in programme activities planned to meet intended educational outcomes (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013); the emotional investment a student makes in their learning (Chapman, 2003); the degree of student involvement in the processes of quality assurance and enhancement (QAA, 2018); plus the collaborative practices of student and HEI learning and working together (Advance



HE, 2019). Most significantly though, Thomas (2019), Zepke (2015) and Denovan et al. (2020) discuss evidence which directly links student engagement to successful student outcomes, demonstrating the importance of research for understanding and investing in student engagement practices.

For the purposes of this article, the term 'student engagement' is to be understood as relating to student involvement in and commitment to their own learning and is aligned to specific features, such as time, effort, attendance, use of available resources, study intentions, and their overall notions of learning (Leach, 2016). In addition, HEI involvement in these student engagement practices is also considered (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013). Bond and Bedenlier (2019) report that engagement is more likely to develop when relationships between teachers and students are strong, and students feel part of the learning community (Kahu, 2013), aligning with social and relational pedagogical practices (Jones, 2021; 2023, Tinto, 1993; 1997).

Whilst the literature demonstrates that there are already multiple meanings and interpretations of student engagement, the subject is still explored, debated, and measured demonstrating the currency and longevity of this 'enigma' (Bond & Bedenlier 2019, p1). The allure/popularity for researching student engagement supports the need for a new lens to investigate the complexity of the phenomena from a different perspective. Use of the PATA theory lens in student engagement research would provide an opportunity for fresh insight which would then benefit HEIs and their student population.

#### *Application of the PATA Theory Lens in Research as a Method*

To apply the PATA theory lens, the research intention would need to be rooted in the enquiry of student related phenomena with a focus on analysing barriers to student engagement via alienation or analysing factors leading to positive levels of student engagement.

So far, the PATA theory lens has been applied to the widening participation/disadvantaged demographic using a range of research methods such as systematic literature reviews, and qualitative and quantitative data collection methods (Jones & Nangah, 2020; Jones, 2021, 2023). Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013)

believe qualitative studies to be valuable in order to examine student engagement, as they provide personal perspectives of lived experiences which would not be present within quantitative National Student Survey (NSS) data, although both qualitative and quantitative methods present with their own merits and pitfalls. Stanton et al. (2013) advise that qualitative studies contribute to understanding the emotional and cognitive aspects of student engagement. However, Trowler and Trowler (2010) excluded qualitative studies as they viewed them as not being robust. Therefore, qualitative and/or quantitative data can enhance the overall understanding and subsequent practice of student engagement, for which the PATA theory lens becomes a valid choice as a research theory.

Moreover, this lens could be applied to subject discipline area and/or year group and acts as a tool to make sense of patterns of student behaviours, characteristics, and demographics. Furthermore, it can be applied using bespoke research designs that fit with the needs of the HEI, the student market and in response to worldwide issues such as the economy, political challenges or indeed in response to global issues such as the post pandemic landscape (Jones & Bell, 2024). It is without question that trauma related experiences can significantly affect a student's psychosocial status and thus academic trust (Jones & Nangah, 2020) providing evidence of the PATA theory in action. Such vast research possibilities for using the PATA theory would then not only validate it within research, but more importantly would contribute to the gathering of new data for HEIs to consider within their student engagement related practice.

## **CASE VIGNETTES**

In this section there are three Case Vignette scenarios that demonstrate how the PATA theory lens can be applied as a methodological approach to HE research.

### *Case Vignette 1*

#### *The Research Focus*

A small institution based within a university centre that is located on a Further Education College site with 600 commuter students. This university centre is positioned within an urban area where high deprivation is prevalent. Data suggests

that following the start of term attendance is reported at 95% across the institution, but 5 weeks later, this has dropped to 74%. On closer inspection, lower attendance can be linked to specific courses.

How might the research investigation into the identified issue be examined through the lens of the PATA theory?

1. What is the evidence to suggest that there are barriers to student engagement?
2. How might self-concept and self-esteem (psychosocial) links to academic trust be investigated directly with the students on specific programmes, what research methods could be employed?
3. How would this data provide insight for the HEI into their practices?
4. How could the results lead to change and increased student engagement?

In the **Case Vignette 1** above, the evidence suggests that there are barriers to student engagement for some courses based on the reduction in attendance data. This indicates that alienation may be present and provides justification for further scrutiny into the factors contributing to lower attendance for some courses. Whilst Popenici (2013) believes that ultimately students make the choice whether to engage in their studies, the attendance barriers within this Case Vignette could be financially related, as the institution is in an area of high deprivation and all the students commute in to study. Financial hardship includes the inability to meet essential transportation costs (Mirowsky & Ross, 2001; Jones & Bell, 2024), and being in financial difficulties can result in low self-esteem (Frankham, Richardson & Maguire, 2019) which therefore may lead people to alienate themselves from aspects of life that have a cost attached. Other reasons for lower attendance in specific courses also need to be explored in case the presence of alienation is directly linked to a loss of trust in staff or the course content.

Analysing any discrepancies between student's psychosocial status to examine how this could be affecting academic trust levels and thus student engagement (Jones, 2021; 2023), can provide insight into why attendance has lowered in the first term or why alienation is presenting. Gaining this knowledge can help the HEI to adjust

practices at ground level which can significantly improve student's feelings within the domain of alienation and can aid the re-engagement process. It is essential to address any issues immediately as according to Popenici (2013), almost one third of all university students do not graduate, therefore, a rapid turnaround in the analysis of the data collected would be required to try and reduce the attrition rate.

Using mixed methods and employing both interpretivist/positivist, qualitative and quantitative research traditions to gain a holistic view of the research problem, but also the intricacies of the students themselves, might be most appropriate. Mixed methods research may take more time and effort to undertake, the rewards are potentially more extensive (Migiro & Magangi, 2011; Tight, 2019a; Halcomb, Massey & Gunowa, 2023), although a full analysis of research traditions would be needed to provide clear justification for any research design adopted (Opie & Brown, 2019). The qualitative element would enable students and staff to discuss what the issues may be in either interview or focus group format and the quantitative element could be used to triangulate this knowledge. In the absence of a psychological testing tool, quantitative methods such as a likert scale can be used to measure discrepancies between psychosocial status and academic trust (Jones, 2021; Nemoto & Beglar, 2014).

The data gained would enable the HEI to take a deep dive into their HE practices, course or programmes, to find out specifically which teaching and learning barriers are affecting those students, or which demographics are most affected by the identified attendance changes. The PATA theory provides time and space to analyse and identify the intricate needs of this student demographic leading to bespoke HEI action to address such equality and inclusion concerns. Acknowledged limitations are potentially the flexibility of responses the HEI can implement to support the specific students, and a thorough analysis of student outcomes would need to be incorporated into any scoping exercises to justify and support a rationale.

### *Case Vignette 2*

#### *The Research Focus*

A HE institution based within a rural university site with approximately 12,000 students, who are mainly based in halls of residence. Data reports that from the initial start of

term attendance was reported at 95% across the institution, and 11 weeks later, attendance has roughly maintained this engagement level and currently sits at approximately 91% across all courses delivered. Assessment submission data also reports evidence that students are engaging confidently across their courses. On closer inspection, higher attendance, corresponding with assessment submissions, and low assessment submission extension applications can be linked to specific courses. NSS data and DHLE data also corresponds providing evidence of high levels of student engagement and satisfaction. You might investigate this or examine this to recognise and identify what is going well and to share those findings with other institutions or across the sector.

How might the research investigation into the identified issue be examined through the lens of the PATA theory?

1. What is the evidence to suggest that barriers to student engagement are low?
2. How might self-concept and self-esteem (psychosocial) links to academic trust be investigated directly with the students on specific programmes, what research methods could be employed?
3. How would this data provide insight for the HEI into their practices?
4. How could the results lead to change or sharing of good practice?

In **Case Vignette 2** above, the suggestion is that barriers to student engagement are low from the high levels of student attendance, assessment submissions and low exceptional factors applications, which demonstrate the absence of alienation in this example. However, what could be investigated using the PATA theory lens is the phenomena of strong student engagement. Therefore, the research could establish whether there are correlations between a student's psychosocial status and high levels of academic trust, identifying the specific practices or elements that contribute to this phenomenon. Understanding this alongside the HEI systems, strategies and practices that are contributing to high levels of engagement would enable the sharing of good practice across the HE community.

Similar to Case Vignette 1, HE researchers could employ research strategies from the available traditions such as interpretivist/positivist, qualitative, quantitative or adopt a mixed methods approach. Again, in the absence of a psychological testing tool, quantitative methods can be used to measure discrepancies between psychosocial status and academic trust, such as a likert scale (Jones, 2021). The qualitative element would enable students and staff to discuss trust levels and what is contributing to high levels of engagement; is it connected to student sense of self or sense of being part of a community, or having a sense of belonging within the HEI or could this be related to the demographic of the student population. The quantitative element could be used to identify patterns relating to student psychosocial status comparing this to their academic trust levels. To triangulate further, qualitative data collection could be used bringing to the forefront the student and staff voice.

Historically, the measures for student engagement have been quantitative as they have focussed on tangible figures such as attendance data, standardised test scores, truancy, and graduation rates. However, Taylor and Parsons (2011) suggest these all report on levels of achievement rather than engagement.

Kahu (2013) believes relationships with staff are crucial for learning and recommends that teaching staff should increase student awareness of the factors that are within their control to affect engagement such as motivation, personality and self-theories (Dismore et al., 2019). This aligns with the PATA theory as this would specifically explore the behaviours, characteristics, and demographics of higher education students in relation to the effects on their engagement.

The data gained in this Case Vignette would be useful to share with other HEI's who have similar student demographics but present with lower student engagement levels. Similarly, lessons learnt from other institutions where students' psychosocial status positively influences their academic trust levels can also be shared across the HE research community. Pedagogical improvements, strategic planning and improved systems would benefit not only students, but HEI's with their continual improvement strategies leading to stronger outcomes and student satisfaction levels. Data gathered from student engagement surveys are often used to change policies and practices (Klemencic & Chirikov, 2015), and as the government has an increased interest in

measuring student outcomes (Kahu, 2013) having attached a proportion of funding to student retention and completion (Leach, 2016), the importance of student engagement within HE cannot be underestimated.

Again, the PATA theory lens provides a structure to research and understand a particular student behavioural phenomenon with a view to learning lessons and sharing good practice across HEI communities and aligns with new ways of thinking and exploring student engagement within the collective HE environment.

### *Case Vignette 3*

#### *The Research Focus*

A large Post-92 institution with over 30,000 students located in a main city centre. Deprivation is high in the surrounding areas and the student population is made up of mainly commuter students with lower numbers of traditional students in nearby halls of residence. Data post-pandemic has identified an exponential rise in students reporting mental health and wellbeing difficulties. Academic staff and personal tutors have also reported a rise in students struggling to turn up for lectures and seminars describing significant levels of anxiety than experienced by student's pre-pandemic. On closer inspection, these barriers to engagement are not necessarily course specific and whilst it does appear that students are accessing the virtual learning environments, the barriers caused by poor mental health and wellbeing are increasing applications for exceptional factors and student withdrawals. Therefore, further investigation is needed to find ways of decreasing student withdrawals, exceptional factors and improving student mental health and wellbeing.

How might the research investigation into the identified issue be examined through the lens of the PATA theory?

1. What is the evidence to suggest that there are barriers to student engagement?
2. How might self-concept and self-esteem (psychosocial) links to academic trust be investigated what research methods could be employed?
3. How would this data provide insight for the HEI into their practices?
4. How could the results lead to change and increased student engagement?

In **Case Vignette 3** above, the evidence suggests that the barriers to student engagement have culminated from the effects of the global pandemic and the interruptions to educational experiences for students. Current evidence demonstrates that post-covid students are struggling to attend and engage within their programmes of study (Chen & Lucock, 2022; Dickenson, 2023; Hordósy, 2023; Jones & Bell, 2024; Montacute et al., 2022; HM Government 2023; The Sutton Trust, 2023a and 2023b), and this lack of attendance and engagement may therefore also impact on sense of belonging. Furthermore, Cassidy et al. (2019) argue that the current assessment strategies used by HEIs to capture student engagement fail to accurately measure student engagement and sense of belonging.

In this Case Vignette it is clear to see that student mental health and wellbeing is severely affecting student engagement for traditional on-campus activities (Jones & Bell, 2024). Therefore, alienation is presented in this example as relating to the student's individual feelings, which presents as a higher prevalence of anxiety. During Covid the face of HE changed as it became necessary across all institutions to deliver classes online. As a result, the human interaction was lost, and many students started university online and so the usual/traditional anxieties associated with leaving home to study did not materialise. For most students their HE experience took place from their bedrooms, with many sharing workspaces with siblings or family members (Jones & Bell, 2024). Furthermore, relationships were not forged, friendships suffered, and what should have been a rite of passage for many young people became a lonely and isolated time. Use of the PATA theory can provide a much deeper insight into the post-pandemic HE phenomena.

Developing knowledge of the wider societal and global effects of the impact of the pandemic on students could aid HEI's in understanding the influence of forces outside of their usual remit, and also provides justification for the adaption of practice to increase student experience beyond the virtual classroom. This could include stronger scrutiny of existing on-campus experiences, and thus, aim to aid the re-engagement process and to reduce factors relating to student alienation, strengthening trust between the student and the HEI.



The research methods most suited here might well be to undertake a systematic literature review from the current global research community, aligning aspects to psychosocial status (self-concept, self-esteem), academic trust and the global pandemic, encompassing the intricacies of the PATA theory. This would provide an opportunity to assimilate vast amounts of existing data and draw upon expertise from across the globe. In this example, employing existing empirical research covering a wide variety of research methods including qualitative and quantitative research traditions would bring insight to the research phenomena. It would also provide opportunities to analyse the results, providing an evidence base for which future localised research can be built upon (Jones & Bell, 2024). However, time limitations for undertaking systematic reviews could delay essential changes to practices which would encourage re-engagement and decrease feelings of alienation in the student population.

#### **WIDER RESEARCHER CASE VIGNETTE REFLECTION POINTS:**

1. What might be the implications for ethics?
2. How might validity and reliability be demonstrated?
3. What participant sample size would be representative?
4. What might be the limitations of this research methodological approach?
5. What might be the benefits of this research methodological approach?

To summarise, the three Case Vignettes above present a range of different research approaches to investigating student behaviours, characteristics and demographics through the lens of the PATA theory. This provides examples in practice of how this theory can be applied within a HE research context, highlighting the flexibility of application of either a research problem affecting student engagement and HEIs, or alternatively as a tool to identify a positive impact of increased academic trust on student engagement based on psychosocial status phenomena.

## ANALYSIS AND CRITICAL DEBATE

There are strengths and limitations to any research theory, and it is important to recognise these constraints so that researchers are clear and well informed of any potential difficulties or consequences. It is crucial to present and acknowledge the critical debates of the PATA theoretical lens in research practice and to justify its position within the field of HE research.

In the first instance, the main limitation relates to its embryonic state, so as a new concept, there is scope to validate this further from a research perspective. As with any new contribution to the HE field, a period of time needs to pass so the HE community can absorb new approaches before identifying issues or restrictions and reporting on them. Additionally, this theoretical lens does not consider the other domains of alienation theory (Mann, 2001), such as the postmodern condition - the sociocultural context, positioned as subject/object – the primacy of discourse, the student as outsider – knowledge, power and insight, bereft of the capacity of creativity – the teaching and learning process, exiled from the self – loss of the ownership of the learning process, disciplined into docility – assessment practices and, leave me alone – alienation as a strategy of self-preservation.

It is also not an educational psychological testing method, which again may present limitations when trying to understand the phenomena of HE student psychological behaviours. However, the PATA theory provides a scaffold on which to build and explore the HE student phenomena that we are encountering in a world ever changing and responding to high stakes issues that are having a psychological effect on our student communities (Jones & Nangah, 2020; Jones & Bell, 2024).

The role of theory in academic research is important to establish new ways of considering certain phenomena, and to give meaningful explanation to what is being studied. Dankasa (2015) deems a good theory to be one that can be understood by both professionals and non-professionals, and Tellis (2017, p3) defines a good theory as a ‘simple explanation for a phenomenon’, whereas Goodson (2010, p11) refers to theories as being ‘stories’. Maassen and Stensaker (2005, cited in Tight, 2019b, p7) state that, ‘it is vital to search for and use robust and rich theories in our common

development of the field of higher education studies', and the need for theory is further explored by Orchard and Winch (2015), who believe that it helps educators to consider the reasons behind aspects of their practice and then comprehend how to make improvements. Bartunek (2020, p224) values theory for its ability to 'help readers appreciate phenomena more deeply in ways they had not imagined before'. The PATA theory encompasses all these aspects of the role, need and value for theory and has the potential to make a difference to the outcomes for HE students and equality, therefore further highlighting the contribution of the PATA theory lens to the HE research community.

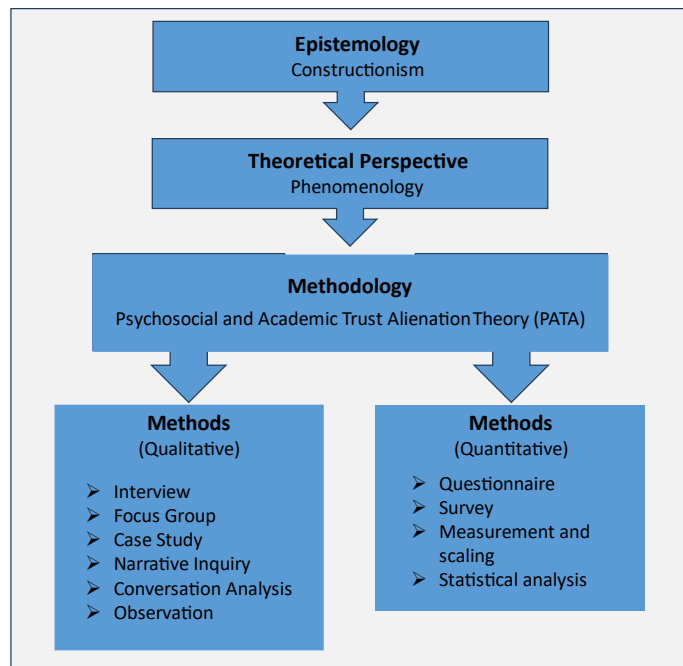
It also has to be acknowledged that the PATA theoretical lens is situated within the domains of social science research (Somekh & Lewin, 2012; Henn, Weinstein & Foard, 2013) and may cause some critique within the broader scientific community because of the variability of research methods that can be adopted to analyse a phenomenon using this approach. However, this is true of many educational theories particularly when focusing on the complexities of human nature and the variabilities of the social science disciplines (Crotty, 2012). Researchers seek new ways to make sense of the world around them (Crotty, 2012) and the PATA theory provides some flexibilities to triangulate data via the employment of a wide range of research methods. This would not only rationalise, but also strengthen and authenticate results. Whether the research traditions adopted be interpretivist, positivist, qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods (Crotty, 2012; Hall, 2020), the PATA theory provides a platform for reliability with a robust research design approach to the topic of interest. In addition, the triangulation of data collection methods can aid rigour and reliability, strengthening the legitimacy and validity of a research study, especially those focused on sensitive social science subjects. Employing a range of data collection methods reduces further the potential for researcher influence or bias (Abdulai & Owusu-Ansah, 2014). This theory needs testing for its strengths and limitations by the HE research community.

The PATA theory's epistemological position sits within the domains of constructionism as meaning is constructed and not revealed, to develop knowledge and understanding aligned to the research problem. According to Crotty (2012, p9) '... subject and object emerge as partners in the generation of meaning'; subject being the participants and

object as the concepts where meaning is constructed together to create an understanding of knowledge. As the PATA theory is reliant on the subject and object working jointly to build knowledge, this leads to the rationalisation of a constructivist epistemology. The PATA theory cannot capture an objectivist epistemological approach because the idea of seeking the only 'objective truth' (Crotty, 2012, p8) does not fit entirely with the ethos of researching student behaviours, characteristics and demographics. Likewise, a subjectivist epistemology would not fit with the PATA theory lens as this is focused on 'imposing meaning on the object by the subject' (ibid).

Furthermore, the PATA theory fits as a methodology within the realms of phenomenology as it enables researchers to present a narrative to represent the phenomena that is being studied (Gaudet & Robert, 2018), and extracts significant statements from the data and formulates meaning from them (Tight, 2019b). Neubauer, Witkop and Varpio (2019, p91) believe it is imperative for the researcher engaging in phenomenological research to be familiar with the philosophical 'interpretations of human experience', whilst Morrow, Rodriguez and King (2015, p644) advise, 'descriptive phenomenology is especially valuable in areas where there is little existing research'. An additional crucial aspect of phenomenology is understanding that 'social reality has to be grounded in people's experiences of social reality' (Gray, 2011, p22). The focal point of PATA theory lens research is to understand how students' psychosocial status affects the academic trust of their HE experiences and the relationships that arise out of the social exchanges therein, permitting researchers to construe the associations that the participants make relating to their HE experiences.

The ethical implications lie, as always in the hands of the researcher themselves and their ability to fully understand the principles and intricacies of new and emerging educational theories, which can interfere significantly with the ethics and validity of the end results. To counteract these issues, it would be prudent to situate the PATA theory within a research context, which the diagram below may help to solidify.



**Figure 2. Diagram of PATA Theory lens situated within a research context.**

To summarise there are strengths, weaknesses, limitations and benefits to all research theories, methodologies and methods, however, what the PATA theory lens does bring is a new approach to the HE research society. Tight (2019b) asserts that the HE research community needs to develop their use and demonstration of engagement with theory in research practice, highlighting the need for the presentation of new and emerging theories within the HE domain.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article discussed the PATA theory as a new research methodology to support researchers who are curious about examining the complexities of the HE student community, and the HE Institutional and political landscapes. Additionally, a critical debate was presented which analysed and evaluated the many aspects, intricacies and complications of the PATA theory as a HE research lens. The conclusion of this debate being that the PATA theory is indeed, a significant original contribution to the field of HE Research, despite some acknowledged limitations.

The use of the PATA theory has been identified as appropriate for multiple aspects of HE research, and now needs to be examined and critiqued further within the HE research community which would aid and strengthen the credibility of the PATA theory in HE research contexts, and lead to recognition as a suitable tool to gather previously undiscovered insights. Its flexibility provides an original lens into various phenomena from different, uncharted perspectives, aligning with Dankasa's (2015, p65) views that 'a theory needs to benefit the progression of research' and that a 'well-crafted theory supports logical thoughts and helps to make sense of the reality'. These are points of discussion that are at the forefront throughout this article. Additionally, as concerns for student mental health and wellbeing in HE are growing (Jones & Bell, 2024). Boulton et al. (2015, p1) advise that 'the relationship between engagement and wellbeing is not well understood', which would further underpin the need the research community has to explore new and original theoretical concepts.

Throughout this article the lens of the PATA theory has been applied to the complexities of the HE research community. This identifies that the PATA theory lends itself comfortably to all types of HEI settings, systems and structures, nationally and internationally demonstrating flexibility in terms of accessibility for the HE research community. Not only does the PATA theory lens offer an aspect in which to research and understand student behaviours, characteristics and demographics, it enables researchers to seek answers to the phenomenon of HEI issues. Additionally, this can encompass changes that relate to worldwide issues and an ever changing HE society, meaning that the PATA theory lens can be attributed to research in HE at macro, meso and micro levels. Finally, and most importantly, the PATA theory lens is a new and original contribution to the HE research community.

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**DATA STATEMENT:** All literature used within this article has been appropriately cited in the reference list and clearly marked. All the literature is accessible via academic databases or through open access databases as stated.

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