

The Relationship Between Social Belonging and Student Engagement Among Members of Students Clubs and Associations in a Malaysian Private College

Sofea Anis Shahrilnizam^{1*}, Mimi Farah Mohamad Jazman²

^{1,2}*INTEC Education College, 40200, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia*

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between social belonging and student engagement among members of student clubs and associations at a private college in Shah Alam, Malaysia. While previous research has highlighted the link between belonging and engagement primarily in classroom contexts, little is known about how these constructs interact within extracurricular settings. The study aimed to determine whether the number of clubs joined, duration of membership, and leadership roles predicted students' sense of belonging and engagement. Using a correlational survey design, data were collected from 54 students across various clubs. Pearson correlation analyses revealed that engagement was significantly and positively correlated with the number of clubs joined but not with duration or leadership roles. Conversely, belonging showed no significant relationship with any participation indicators. However, belonging and engagement were strongly and positively correlated with each other, suggesting that while the two are interrelated, they arise from different conditions. The findings indicate that while participation breadth enhances engagement through exposure to diverse social experiences, belonging depends more on the quality of interpersonal relationships and inclusivity within club environments. These findings add to the relatively limited literature on extracurricular participation in non-Western higher education contexts and highlight the importance of fostering inclusive and supportive club cultures that promote both engagement and belonging. Future research should investigate these dynamics using longitudinal and qualitative approaches to better understand how engagement may develop into belonging over time.

^{1*} Corresponding author. *E-mail address:* sofeaanis2192@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

A sense of belonging is a fundamental human need (Maslow, 1943). In the educational context, it refers to the degree to which a student feels accepted, respected, included, and supported by peers and the broader institution (Strayhorn, 2018). Research has shown that students who experience a stronger sense of belonging are more likely to achieve higher academic success (Freeman et al., 2007; Murphy and Zirkel, 2015; Ostrove and Long, 2007; Pittman and Richmond, 2007; Walton and Cohen, 2011).

Recent research continues to emphasize the importance of belonging in shaping students' educational experiences. For instance, Alles et al. (2022) highlighted that educational environments that actively foster belonging can significantly enhance students' psychological well-being and engagement in learning activities. Similarly, Pedler et al. (2022) found that university students who reported a stronger sense of belonging also demonstrated higher motivation, enjoyment, and persistence in their studies. These findings suggest that belonging is not only an emotional experience but also an important factor influencing students' participation and commitment to their academic communities.

Student engagement has also been widely recognized as a key factor affecting both student success and development. Rather than being a single concept, engagement is understood as a multidimensional construct that encompasses behavioral, social, cognitive and emotional dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004; Fredricks et al., 2016). Engaged students tend to invest greater effort in both academic and social activities, which contributes to improved learning outcomes and overall development.

Recent studies continue to highlight the strong relationship between belonging and engagement in higher education. Gillen-O'Neel (2021) demonstrated that students' day-to-day engagement can vary based on their sense of connection to the environment, indicating that engagement is not a fixed trait but a dynamic state influenced by context and experience. In online learning contexts, Thomas-Nedd (2025) also reported that students who experienced a stronger sense of belonging demonstrated higher levels of engagement and participation in academic activities.

Participation in extracurricular activities, such as student clubs and associations, may therefore provide an important context in which belonging and engagement develop simultaneously. These activities allow students to build social relationships, develop leadership skills, and form supportive peer networks beyond the classroom environment. Winstone et al. (2022) found that involvement in extracurricular activities contributed positively to students' wellbeing and sense of belonging by creating opportunities for social connection and identity development. Similarly, Genita et al. (2024) reported that participation in extracurricular activities significantly increased students' behaviour, emotional, and cognitive engagement.

International research suggests that participation in extracurricular activities can be a powerful mechanism linking these two outcomes. For example, Dotterer et al. (2007) found that middle school students involved in after-school programs reported a stronger sense of school belonging, which in turn predicted higher behavioral and academic engagement. Similarly, Eccles et al. (2003) demonstrated that participation in organised activities fostered social support networks and emotional connections that encouraged sustained involvement and effort. More recently, a synthesis by Allen et al. (2018) concluded that sense of belonging was a significant predictor of engagement. More recent studies continue to support this relationship, showing that students who feel socially connected to their institutions demonstrate stronger academic and social engagement (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Pedler et al., 2022; Winstone et al., 2022). In short, co-curricular spaces like student clubs and associations create the conditions for belonging, and this belonging, in turn, sustains and strengthens engagement.

1.1 Social Belonging and Student Engagement in Malaysia

In Malaysia, research has largely focused on what happened within the classroom instead of outside of the classroom (Fredricks et al., 2016; Goodenow, 1993; Pino-James et al., 2019). Recent Malaysian research underscores that out-of-class environments, especially student clubs and associations, are uniquely conducive to social belonging and engagement.

Research indicates strong demand for co-curricular activities, as they provide opportunities for learning and personal development beyond formal coursework (Shahrudin et al., 2021). For instance, one Malaysian survey found that involvement in extracurricular associations “improves students’ learning experience” and equips them with positive attitudes and value-added skills (Shahrudin et al., 2021). Students themselves report that these activities have numerous benefits for both their “academic experience and personal growth” (Shahrudin et al., 2021, p.10). In another study, participation in such activities is found to give students opportunities to socialize, build soft skills, and form peer networks (Kuan et al., 2019; Saba, 2023; Shahrudin et al., 2021). These activities often complement formal academic learning by promoting communication, leadership, and teamwork. The same Malaysian study noted that involvement in co-curricular sports or uniformed groups was linked to higher motivation and could help improve study performance through boosting students’ aspirations and reducing absenteeism (Kuan et al., 2019).

These activities also play an important role in facilitating social interaction and peer support, which are key elements in developing students’ sense of belonging within educational institutions (Pedler et al., 2022; Winstone et al., 2022). Through these interactions, extracurricular activities can create environments that promote both student engagement and a sense of belonging.

Despite the numerous benefits of actively engaging in clubs and associations, empirical research on the role of extracurricular engagement and social belonging in Malaysia remains sparse. International research shows that participation in clubs or sports is associated with a stronger sense of school belonging and engagement (Bang, Chang and Kim, 2014; Dotterer et al., 2007; Eccles et al., 2003; Hoang, 2025; Temel et al., 2024) but Malaysian-specific studies have not specifically addressed these two variables. Therefore, this study has placed an emphasis on looking at social belonging and student engagement in a private college, Shah Alam.

1.2 Research Objectives and Hypothesis

This study aims to examine the relationship between students’ participation in clubs and associations and their sense of belonging and engagement within a private college in Shah Alam, Malaysia. While previous research has explored the role of belonging and engagement primarily within classroom contexts, fewer studies have investigated how these constructs interact within extracurricular environments such as students’ clubs and associations, particularly within Malaysian higher education settings.

Specifically, this study investigates whether students’ participation characteristics— namely the number of clubs joined, duration of membership, and leadership roles held within clubs— are associated with their sense of belonging and levels of engagement. In addition, the study examines the relationship between students’ sense of belonging and their level of engagement in club activities.

The objectives of this study are therefore:

H1: To examine the relationship between the number of clubs joined and students’ sense of belonging.

H2: To examine the relationship between the number of clubs joined and students’ engagement.

H3: To examine the relationship between duration of membership in clubs and students' sense of belonging.

H4: To examine the relationship between duration of membership in clubs and students' engagement.

H5: To examine the relationship between leadership roles within clubs and students' sense of belonging.

H6: To examine the relationship between leadership roles within clubs and students' engagement.

H7: To examine the relationship between students' sense of belonging and their level of engagement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several recent studies that addressed both variables of interest were included in the analysis. From the review, three main themes were identified as discussed in the following sections.

2.1 Social Belonging and Student Engagement Within Minority Groups

For students from minority backgrounds, belonging often becomes a central concern, as their social positioning within academic spaces exposes them to risks of marginalization and exclusion. Researchers consistently highlight belonging as a key predictor of engagement, persistence, and achievement. Kitchen and Williams (2019) found that Black and Latinx undergraduates in the U.S. reported stronger belonging when institutions provided support and inclusive climates, showing that structural engagement was more influential than individual actions. Similarly, Li, Chen, and Li (2020) showed that bullying in rural Chinese schools undermined boys' sense of belonging, which in turn reduced their engagement and achievement, while girls were less affected in this pathway. Heikamp et al. (2020) also confirmed that discrimination reduced belonging and task engagement among Turkish and Moroccan minority youth in Belgium, though inclusive diversity climates helped mitigate these negative effects.

For international students, Van Horne et al. (2018) found that they experienced lower social belonging compared to domestic peers, despite similar levels of academic engagement, suggesting that limited social integration can constrain overall engagement. Finally, Rowe et al. (2023) highlighted that working students felt belonging when recognised and supported by supervisors and peers, which enhanced their engagement in work-integrated learning.

Collectively, these studies indicate that for minority and non-traditional students, belonging plays a pivotal role in shaping engagement, whereas experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and social isolation undermine both.

2.2 Social Belonging and Student Engagement During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional student life, raising new questions about how belonging and engagement could be sustained in remote contexts.

Maluenda-Albornoz et al. (2023) found that social support enhanced engagement indirectly by strengthening students' sense of belonging, indicating that belonging is the key mechanism through which support becomes meaningful. Similarly, Versteeg et al. (2022) reported that both academic belonging and social integration promoted engagement during remote learning, although their relative importance varied depending on students' levels of resilience.

These findings underscore the role of belonging as a central driver of engagement even in distributed learning environments. However, research during COVID-19 has mainly focused on classrooms and online learning, with little attention to extracurricular contexts as alternative sources of belonging.

2.3 Social Belonging and Student Engagement Within Extracurricular Activities in Higher Education

Extracurricular activities (ECAs) play a vital role in higher education by providing opportunities for peer connection, identity development, and institutional integration.

Winstone et al. (2022) found that students involved in ECAs reported higher levels of belonging and wellbeing, with activities serving as sources of identity affirmation and social support, although access was not equally available to all groups. Genita et al. (2024) further demonstrated that extracurricular participation in Indonesian universities significantly boosted behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, with emotional engagement particularly linked to students' sense of belonging.

Other studies also indicate that broader participation in extracurricular activities may strengthen students' social network and institutional connections, which can enhance engagement and motivation (Hoang, 2025). Therefore, it is hypothesised that students who participate in a greater number of clubs and associations will report a higher sense of belonging (H1) and engagement (H2).

The duration of participation may also influence students' sense of belonging and engagement. Long-term involvement in student organisations may allow students to develop deeper relationships and stronger connections within their communities ((Maluenda-Albornoz et al., 2022; Zamorano-Veragua et al., 2025). Therefore, it is hypothesis that longer participation in clubs or associations will be associated with a higher sense of belonging (H3) and higher engagement (H4).

Leadership roles within student organisations may further influence students' engagement and belonging experiences. Leadership positions often involve greater responsibility and interaction with other members, which may increase students' involvement and commitment to organisational activities. However, some research also suggests that leadership roles can introduce additional responsibilities and stress that may shape students' experience differently (Rowe et al., 2023; Gibson et al., 2025). Therefore, it is hypothesised that students holding higher positions within clubs or associations will report a higher sense of belonging (H5) and levels of engagement (H6).

Finally, a large body of research consistently demonstrates a positive relationship between belonging and engagement. Students who feel accepted and supported within their educational communities are more likely to participate actively and invest effort in their learning activities (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Allen et al., 2022). Therefore, the final hypothesis proposed that a higher sense of belonging will be associated with higher levels of student engagement (H7).

Across contexts, prior research consistently shows a positive relationship between belonging and engagement, whether among the minority groups, during crises like COVID-19, or within extracurricular settings. However, most studies have been conducted in Western contexts, with only limited evidence from non-Western settings (Genita et al, 2024; Li, Chen & Li, 2020) and only two were focusing on extracurricular activities in higher education (Genita et al, 2024; Winstone et al, 2022). Although Genita et al. (2024) examined the relationships between social belonging and student engagement in extracurricular activities within non-Western higher education contexts, it is important to note that Indonesia and Malaysia, while regionally close, have distinct cultural contexts that may shape these dynamics differently. To address this, the present study investigates the relationship between belonging and engagement in student clubs and associations at a Malaysian private college, extending current knowledge into a new cultural and institutional context.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationship between students' participation in clubs and associations and their sense of belonging and engagement. A correlational design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to examine the strength and direction of relationships between variables rather than establish causal relationships.

Specifically, the study investigated whether students' participation characteristics, including the number of clubs joined, duration of membership within clubs, and leadership roles held within clubs, were associated with their sense of belonging and levels of engagement. Data were collected using a self-administered survey questionnaire distributed online.

3.2 Participants and Sampling Procedure

The participants consisted of 54 students who were members of student clubs and associations at a private college in Shah Alam, Malaysia.

A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants. Students who were actively involved in at least one student clubs or associations were invited to participate in the study. This sampling approach was appropriate because the research focused specifically on students who had experience participating in extracurricular activities.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the research before completing the questionnaire, and their responses were collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality.

3.3 Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed through Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of three sections.

The first section collected participation-related information, including the number of clubs joined, the duration of membership in clubs, and leadership roles held within the clubs.

The second section measured students' sense of belonging within clubs and associations using items adapted from the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale developed by Goodenow (1993). These items assessed students' perception of acceptance, respect, and inclusion within their club environments.

The third section measured student engagement using items adapted from the engagement scale developed by Fredricks et al., (2016). The engagement scale included four dimensions:

1. Behavioural engagements
2. Emotional engagement
3. Cognitive engagement
4. Social engagement

All items were measured using a five-point likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), Higher scores indicated higher levels of engagement.

The wording of several items was modified to reflect the context of student clubs and associations rather than classroom learning environments.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using an online survey distributed through Google Forms. The survey link was shared with students who were members of student clubs and associations within the college.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary and participants were told to exit the questionnaire if they wished to do so. They were also assured that their responses would remain confidential and would be used only for academic research purposes. No personally identifiable information was collected. Once the questionnaire was completed, responses were automatically recorded through Google Forms platform and compiled into a dataset for analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics were first used to summarize participants' responses and provide an overview of the variables measured in the study. Subsequently, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between participation variables and the two main constructs of the study: sense of belonging and student engagement.

The variable analyzed included:

1. Number of clubs joined
2. Duration of membership within clubs
3. Leadership roles within clubs
4. Sense of belonging
5. Level of engagement

Pearson correlation analysis was selected because it allows researchers to examine the strength and direction of linear relationships between continuous variables. Statistical significance was evaluated at the 0.05 significance level ($p < 0.05$).

4. RESULTS

Table 1. Correlation results between variables

| Variable | n | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|-------------------------|----|-------|------|--------|------|------|------|---|
| 1. Engagement | 54 | 73.32 | 9.04 | - | | | | |
| 2. Belonging | 54 | 19.17 | 3.35 | 0.70** | - | | | |
| 3. Amount of club | 54 | 1.56 | 0.57 | 0.35** | 0.13 | - | | |
| 4. Duration within club | 54 | 1.65 | 0.68 | 0.09 | 0.07 | 0.02 | - | |
| 5. Roles within club | 54 | 1.78 | 0.74 | 0.20 | 0.14 | 0.03 | 0.09 | - |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

H1: The more clubs and associations a student joins, the higher the sense of belonging.

A Pearson correlation examined the relationship between amount of club and belonging. The results indicated that the relationship between amount of club and belonging was not significant, $r(52) = 0.13$, $p = 0.36$.

This means that the hypothesis is rejected as results reveal a non-significant relationship between the amount of club and belonging which indicates that the sense of belonging is not related to the amount of club a student joins.

H2: The more clubs and associations a student joins, the higher the sense of engagement

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to evaluate the relationship between amount of club and engagement. There was a significant moderate and positive relationship between amount of club and engagement, $r(52) = 0.35$, $p = 0.01$.

This means that the hypothesis is accepted as results reveal a significant relationship between the amount of club and engagement which indicates that the more club students join, there will be a higher level of engagement experienced.

H3: The longer the student joins a club or association, the higher the sense of belonging

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to evaluate the relationship between duration within club and belonging. The result indicated that the relationship between duration within club and belonging was not significant, $r(52) = 0.07, p = 0.62$.

This means that the hypothesis is rejected as results revealed a non-significant relationship between duration within club and belonging which indicates that sense of belonging may be high or low regardless of the amount of time students spent being part of a club or association.

H4: The longer the student joins a club or association, the higher the sense of engagement

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to evaluate the relationship between duration within club and engagement. The results indicated that the relationship between duration within club and engagement was not significant, $r(52) = 0.09, p = 0.50$.

This means that the hypothesis is rejected as results reveal a non-significant relationship between duration within club and engagement which indicates that the longer a student joins a club, there will not be any differences in the level of engagement experienced.

H5: The higher the position within the club or association, the higher the sense of belonging

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to evaluate the relationship between position in club and belonging. The results indicated that the relationship between position in club and belonging was not significant, $r(52) = 0.14, p = 0.30$.

This means that the hypothesis is rejected as results revealed a non-significant relationship between position in club and belonging which indicates that the sense of belonging is not related to the higher the position of a student in a club.

H6: The higher the position within the club or association, the higher the sense of engagement

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to evaluate the relationship between position in club and engagement. The results indicated that the relationship between position in club and engagement was not significant, $r(52) = 0.20, p = 0.14$.

This means that the hypothesis is rejected as results revealed a non-significant relationship between position in club and engagement which indicates that the sense of engagement is not related to the higher the position of a student in a club.

H7: The higher the sense of belonging, the higher the sense of engagement

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to evaluate the relationship between belonging and engagement. There was a significant moderate positive relationship between belonging and engagement $r(52) = 0.70, p = 0.000$.

This means that the hypothesis is accepted as results revealed a significant relationship between student sense of belonging and level of engagement which indicates that the higher the sense of belonging of student, the higher sense of engagement that the students experienced in a club.

5. DISCUSSION

This study provides nuanced insights into how involvement in student clubs and associations relates differently to engagement and belonging. Engagement was positively correlated with the number of clubs in students joined, whereas belonging did not show a significant relationship with participation indicators such as number of clubs, duration of membership, or leadership roles. Nonetheless, engagement and belonging were positively correlated, indicating that while the two are related, their predictors may differ. One possible explanation concerns the breadth versus depth of participation. Students who join multiple clubs are exposed to a variety of peers, activities, and experiences, which can enhance behavioral and emotional engagement. Prior studies (e.g., Winstone et al., 2022; Genita et al., 2024; Fredricks et al., 2016) have shown that broader extracurricular involvement promotes motivation and engagement by providing diverse learning and social opportunities. However, this breadth may limit relational depth. When students divide their time among several clubs, they may lack the sustained interaction needed to build meaningful, identity-based connections (Maluenda-Albornoz et al., 2022; Rowe et al., 2023; Hoang, 2025). As a result, engagement increases through activity, but belonging remains fragmented across groups.

A second explanation concerns the nature of belonging, which is shaped more by the quality of relationships than by structural involvement. Belonging arises from feeling accepted, valued, and supported within a group (Strayhorn, 2018), not simply from membership length or hierarchical position. Students may remain in clubs for practical reasons, such as, habit, résumé building, or obligation, without experiencing genuine attachment. Leadership roles, though prestigious, can also produce stress, isolation, or emotional distance when responsibilities outweigh support or inclusion (Lorenzo et al., 2025; Gibson et al., 2025). Previous studies (e.g., Allen et al., 2018; Rowe et al., 2023) confirm that belonging is strengthened through trust, equality, and mutual support rather than authority or rank.

Finally, the strong correlation between engagement and belonging reinforces their reciprocal relationship. Students who experience a stronger sense of belonging tend to be more engaged, while active engagement provides opportunities for belonging to develop (Van Horne et al., 2018; Kitchen & Williams, 2019). Yet this transformation depends on inclusive and emotionally safe environments (Heikamp et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2018). In short, engagement may initiate belonging, but belonging deepens only when students experience authentic connection and social support within their clubs.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between social belonging and student engagement among members of student clubs and associations at a private college in Shah Alam, Malaysia. The results indicated that engagement increased with the number of clubs students joined, whereas belonging was not significantly related to any participation indicators. Nevertheless, belonging and engagement were significantly and positively correlated. These findings partially support the hypotheses and align with prior research suggesting that broad participation enhances engagement through exposure to diverse experiences, while belonging is influenced by the depth and inclusivity of interpersonal relationships.

The findings highlight the importance for higher education institutions to go beyond promoting mere participation and instead foster inclusive and supportive club environments that encourage genuine connection. While involvement in multiple clubs enhances engagement, belonging requires deeper, relationship-based experiences that make students feel valued. Institutions can support both outcomes by

implementing mentorship programs, facilitating peer support and inter-club collaboration, and providing leadership training that addresses emotional well-being and role balance. Future research should adopt longitudinal or qualitative approaches to explore how engagement evolves into belonging over time and compare experiences across different institutional or cultural contexts in Malaysia.

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8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

9. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Sofea Anis binti Shahrilnizam: Conceptualisation, data curation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation and writing-original draft; **Mimi Farah binti Mohamad Jazman:** Formal analysis, resources, supervision and writing – review & editing.

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About the Authors

Sofea Anis binti Shahrilnizam, she is a second-year student majoring in Psychology in America Degree Program at INTEC Education College. She has taken courses such as Introduction Psychology, Psychology Work Motivation and Research Methodology. She can be reached through her email at sofeaanis2192@gmail.com.

Mimi Farah binti Mohamad Jazman, is a social science lecturer at Pre-University and Diploma Centre at INTEC Education College. She teaches subjects such as Psychology, Sociology and Research Methodology. She is currently a Phd students at Universiti Putra Malaysia, under the Faculty of Educational Studies, specializing in Educational Psychology. She can be reached through her email at farah.jazman@intec.edu.my.

APPENDIX A SURVEY

A. Survey

A.1 Club and association belonging PSSM (Goodenow, 1993b)

1. I feel like a real part of this club and association.
2. I feel proud of being a student in this club and association.
3. Sometimes I feel as if I am not included in this club and association (reversed).
4. People in this club and association like me the way I am.
5. People in this club and association take my opinions seriously, even if they don't agree.
6. I am treated with as much respect as other students in this club and association.

A.2 Fredricks revised measure (2016 piece)

B1. Behavioral engagement

1. I put effort into learning in my club and association.
2. I keep trying even if something is hard.
3. I completed my club and association work on time.
4. I do other things when I am supposed to be paying attention (Reverse coded).
5. If I don't understand, I give up right away (Reverse coded).

B2. Emotional engagement

1. I look forward to my club and association.
2. I enjoy learning new things in my club and association.
3. I feel good when I am in my club and association.
4. I often feel frustrated in my club and association (Reverse coded).
5. I think that my club and association is boring (Reverse coded).

B3. Cognitive engagement

1. I think about different ways to solve a problem.
2. I try to connect what I am learning to things I have learned before.
3. I try to understand my mistakes when I get something wrong.
4. When work is hard, I only do the easy parts (Reverse coded).
5. I do just enough to get by (Reverse coded).

B4. Social engagement

1. I try to understand other students' ideas in my club and association.
2. I try to work with other classmates who can help me in my club and association.
3. I try to help other students who are struggling in my club and association.
4. When working with others, I don't share my ideas (Reverse coded).
5. I don't help my clubmates with questions (Reverse coded).