

## **Students as partners in the promotion of civic engagement in Higher Education**

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## **Abstract**

The development of the knowledge and skills of students can only be complete when the tenets of civic engagement are inculcated in them to respond to the needs of society. However, due to the weakening role of higher education institutions to develop a university ethos that stimulate civic interest and participation among students, it has become necessary to examine the aspects that enhance civic engagement. Using social-cognitive and transformative learning theories, we examined six major aspects namely, civic knowledge, civic skills, civic culture, cultural diversity, social responsibility and, students as partners to reveal the sets of relationships and antecedents that enhance civic participation among students. We relied on a mixed method approach for gathering and analysing data from students in an HEI setting in Ghana (n=261). Results revealed that cultural diversity experience, social responsibility, and students as partners represent important aspects for stimulating civic participation among students in HEIs.

Keywords: civic engagement; students as partners; social responsibility; cultural diversity experience; civic skills

## **Introduction**

The promotion of civic activities among students in higher education institutions (HEIs) has become contemporary because of the seemingly low involvement of students in civic activities and the weakening structures of HEIs to serve as arenas for developing students' interest in civic activities. Markedly, the erosion of traditional social ties (Putnam, 2000), fading civic and political participation among the youth (Forestiere, 2015) and the fragmentation of extended family systems remain major concerns for researchers across several countries. At the global front, Target 7 of the United Nations sustainable development goal (SDG) 4 suggest among other things that, by 2030, all learners should acquire the knowledge and skills that are essential for promoting sustainable development through global citizenship, human rights, gender equality and appreciation of cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2019a). Further to the call, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has framed the Global Citizenship Education (GCED) strategy to address issues of inequality, poverty and human rights violation that portent world peace and sustainability. More so, UNESCO (2019b) identifies GCED as a tool to educate and empower learners of all ages to be promoters of inclusive, peaceful, tolerant and sustainable societies.

There is no generally accepted definition of civic engagement due to the different positions and ideas of several researchers in the field. However, Ehrlich (2000, vi) defines civic engagement as “working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivations to make that difference”. Diller (2001) suggests that civic engagement represents an individual's obligation to accept the responsibilities of citizenship and to actively participate either alone or with others in volunteer service activities that strengthen a community. By emphasising community support and service, Saltmarsh, Hartley and Clayton (2009) describe civic engagement as a set of activities that occur in communities and are aimed at meeting the specific needs of people. However, from a critical perspective, Ginwright and Cammorata (2007) argue that tenets such as individual and group experiences, contribution to community development, and respect for the rights of others support both individual and collective decisions to uphold social justice. The views of these authors illustrate the importance of civic engagement to the transformation of society and the need to uphold social justice. Conceptually, the term civic engagement serves as an umbrella name for a plethora of activities including service learning, volunteerism, public policy discussions, community support programmes and public awareness creation exercises. Previous research acknowledge the significance of civic engagement in HEIs by explaining that institutions of learning remain logical places for promoting students' civic participation (Boland, 2014; McCunney, 2017). However, the benefits of preparing students to be actively engaged citizens include, the development of their leadership skills (Whitley & Yoder, 2015), intercultural communication skills (Zempter, 2018), tolerance of people with different beliefs (Bowman, 2011; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Zhen, 2017) and developing socially responsible citizens (Toukan, 2018; Zhen, 2017).

Seminal researches have focused on the development of curricular and pedagogical techniques to promote civic engagement (McCunney, 2017; Ostrander, 2004) and the adoption of a practical approach to transform students' behaviour towards civic activities (Fitzgerald et al., 2016). While findings from these important and timely researches present alternatives to the promotion of civic engagement, the challenges persist as students continue to develop indifferent attitudes toward civic activities on and off campus. The importance of investigating complementary aspects that promote students' interest and active participation in civic activities in HEIs served as our point of departure. In order to find alternative approaches to promoting students' interest in civic activities, we sought answers to the central question, what factors influence the development of students' interest and participation in civic activities in HEIs? In providing answers to our question, we contribute in four main ways to the ongoing discourse on finding complementary approaches to promoting students' interest and participation in civic activities especially in HEIs. First, we review the social-cognitive and transformative learning theories that explain the promotion of civic engagement among students. Second, we investigate the important aspects that support the development of students' civic interest and participation. Thirdly, we discuss the prominence of students' associations and groups in enhancing students' civic knowledge and skills. Finally, we examine how students' partnerships could complement the existing formal civic curriculum and pedagogy used by HEIs to enhance students' interest in civic activities.

### **Contextual significance**

The history of education in Gold Coast which is the former name of Ghana commenced in the sixteenth century when the Portuguese who settled in Elmina established a learning centre for slaves who were taught how to read and write (Foster, 1971). Later on, the Danes, Dutch and English also set up schools purposely to teach the indigenes how to read and write as well as arithmetic. Most of these educational activities were undertaken by the Christian missionaries notably, the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society and the Basel Society (Foster 1971). While the local indigenes enrolled in the then missionary schools, their sense of civic responsibility and commitment to their religion were maintained to ensure that they contributed to the development of their communities (Graham, 1971). In relation to state policies on civic participation, Holford (2016) asserts that, civic participation in Africa – especially among former British Colonies including Ghana dates back to the 1940s when the Colonial Office published two major white papers: Mass Education in African Society and Education for Citizenship in Africa. The publication emphasised among others, the stimulation of initiative in African society and mass education that will enable the citizens to participate in public life and contribute to political development in their communities. These policies influenced civic activities in the educational system of Ghana where moral values and community support were incorporated into the school curricular. For

example, Taylor (1974) noted that, reports of the various commissions that were set up between 1900 and 1970 had two fundamental suppositions; firstly, that any educational system in Ghana must reflect the Ghanaian values and meet the needs of the individual as well as the broader society, and secondly, that, education should help the individual develop religious values. Until the present, the educational system has not been able to influence students' sense of civic responsibilities, thereby, resulting in apathy towards civic activities. A recent study by Arnot, Casely-Hayford and Yeboah (2018) in Ghana revealed the practical gaps in integrating the youth into national projects, especially those that address issues of social equality, cultural recognition, critical thinking and inclusion.

### **Theoretical approach**

A growing body of research have espoused the importance of adopting multiple theories and multidimensional approaches in investigating aspects of civic engagement (Metzger, Ferris & Oosterhoff, 2018; Wray-Lake, Metzger & Syvertsen, 2017) to reveal complex sets of relationships and antecedents. We focus on two theories in explaining the rationale for students' interest in civic activities in higher education – social-cognitive and transformative learning theories.

Social cognitive theory explains how human behaviour is motivated and controlled by self-influence and self-regulative mechanisms. According to Bandura (2001), social cognitive theory describes three different modes of agency: personal agency, proxy agency, and collective agency. The undergirding rationale for agency is for individuals to have a direct involvement in their personal development, adaptation and self-renewal (Bandura, 2001). However, in relation to civic engagement, while the personal agency explains students' beliefs in controlling their functioning, collective agency explains how through networks, interdependencies and sociostructural influences, student groups demonstrate their capabilities. Civic values, skills and knowledge represent social-cognitive aspects that are important in explaining civic engagement (Metzger et al., 2018; Wray-Lake, Metzger & Syvertsen, 2017). While self-incentives connect to human behaviour through motivational functions (Bandura, 2001), students become generative, creative, reflective, and, proactive when they participate in civic activities. Consequently, through generative, creative and reflective processes, the minds of students function in relation to the social setting that is prescribed by the civic ethos, group norms, rules and practices that guide the behaviours of students. The application of civic knowledge in a social setting generates civic skills that are essential for individual and group contribution to the transformation of society. Bandura (2002) argues that cultures are diverse and dynamic social systems that operate in a social structure. Additionally, culture serves as an interpretive framework for understanding events and actions in colleges and universities (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). In relation to civic engagement, culture enhance the stability of the social system of students' groups by ensuring that members remain committed to the group and its goals. Therefore, civic culture is demonstrated through shared beliefs,

creation of bonds, shared experiences and adherence to appropriate behaviours by students groups and associations. One of the weaknesses of social-cognitive theory is that, mainstream research in the field have overlooked the importance of social interaction (Overgaard & Michael, 2015) which is an important aspect of the theory. In the context of our study, we explain how civic knowledge, civic skills and civic culture serve as important factors in enhancing civic engagement among students.

Transformative learning explains the process of changing the structures of assumption that influences the understanding and experiences of individuals to make them more inclusive, open, reflective and discriminating (Mezirow, 2003, 58). Perspective transformation by Jack Mezirow; Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and; Laurent Daloz' study on the developmental character of formal education in adulthood typify the three domains of transformative learning (Clark, 1993). Central to Paulo Freire's idea of transformative learning are collaboration and active participation that lie at the intersection between power and social change. The promotion of civic scholarship involves the recognition of the power that students have in driving social change through collaboration and negotiation (Thomas, Stupples, Kiddle, Hall & Palomino-Schalscha, 2019). While in the conventional school setting, students were "habituated to passive schooling" (Shor & Freire, 1987, 25), a transformative learning setting in the context of civic engagement identify students as partners in the learning process. Second, the power given to students to enter into partnership with local communities comes with a responsibility that shape their behaviours towards acceptable norms and practices of society. Therefore, social responsibility serves as a function of schooling (Wentzel, 1991) and a personal value (Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011) that is expressed through beliefs and a sense of obligation to contribute to a greater good. Third, students' adaptation to diverse cultures through understanding and experiences are essential for the promotion of civic engagement. Significantly, the epistemic, sociolinguistic, and psychological meaning perspectives shape the understanding of individual experiences of how they communicate to people from diverse cultures (Nagata, 2006). The weaknesses of transformative learning include, its focus on the development of individuals rather than groups of individuals in a setting and, its lack of critical questioning of the discourse and extra rational aspects (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013). Following our review of the transformative learning theory in relation to civic engagement, we identify students as partners, social responsibility and diversity experience as important aspects that enhance civic participation among students in HEIs.

## **Research questions**

In order to explore the factors that serve to influence the development of students' interest in civic activities on campus, the following research questions were followed:

- **Research Question (RQ) 1:** What factors influence the development of students' interest and participation in civic activities in HEIs?

- **Research Question (RQ) 2:** How are students' civic knowledge and skills, diversity experience and social responsibility tenets enhanced by the university environment?
- **Research Question (RQ) 3:** How does the campus ethos support the concept of student as partners in the promotion of civic engagement among students?

## Materials and methods

We adopted a mixed method approach (see Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) to engage with different types of datasets that could be analysed and compared to draw conclusions regarding the factors that enhance students' participation in civic activities. We followed the mixed method approach because we sought to gather insights into current knowledge about the factors that influence students' interest participation in civic activities while also examining the relationship between the different variables in the study. Previous research has revealed the plausibility of using a mixed method approach for conducting empirical study on students' experiences in civic activities (Lee, Wilder & Yu, 2018; Caspersz & Olaru, 2017). Furthermore, we analysed the data gathered by means of conventional qualitative and quantitative techniques (Runeson, Host, Rainer & Regnell, 2012) and the outcomes were compared to each other. While the survey response data was analysed by way of analysis software *SPSS 20*, we analysed the interviews through content analysis, pre-coding, coding, categorising of codes and the development of themes.

### Participants and setting

The population of this study was 5993 undergraduate students in a university in Ghana who were pursuing various degree programmes in three faculties: Engineering, Computing and Information systems and Information Technology Business. We adopted a simple random sampling method for gathering data from students through survey. The number of students who were contacted to complete the survey was 350 consisting of 140 males representing 53.64%, and 121 females representing 46.36%. In order to gather qualitative data from students, we sampled an executive member each of the following groups: the international students association; Muslim students union; campus Christian fellowship and; students' association representatives from the faculties. The head of students' affairs office was also interviewed to provide information on institutional commitment to promoting civic engagement among students.

### Procedure

The interviews were conducted among six students and the Head of Students' Affairs while we administered 350 questionnaires to respondents from the three faculties in the university. Following the

350 questionnaires distributed, we received 267 completed questionnaires out of which 261, representing 74.57%, constituted valid responses. The questionnaire consisted of 35 items and seven sections namely the: students' understanding of civic engagement; students as partners; the culture of civic engagement; civic knowledge; civic skills; link between social responsibility and civic engagement and diversity experience. The demographic information of respondents section contained five items. The survey required respondents to provide their responses on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represented 'strongly disagree' and 5 represented 'strongly agree' while the demographic information were open-ended. A semi-structured interviews schedule was designed for interviewees to provide their opinions on three themes: the development of civic knowledge and skills as derived from institutional civic culture; their views on diversity experience; their understanding of social responsibility and partnership that are underpinned by the concept of students as partners. Regarding the interview sessions, the potential interviewees were contacted by the researchers and date, venue, and time were agreed upon. Before we administered the final instruments, we undertook a pretest to ensure that respondents and interviewees understood the questions and items. The pretest was performed in order to strengthen the reliability of the datasets. We present detailed analysis of the reliability test of the survey data in the results section of this study.

## Measures

Following our theoretical review, we define civic engagement as a voluntary activity undertaken by individuals or groups to promote the well-being of communities through institutional culture, partnerships, diversity experiences and an obligation to provide social responsibility. All the five items in the civic engagement constructs were culled from the civic duty constructs by Denson and Bowman (2013).

Civic knowledge remains central to the development of the civic skills and experiences of students in HEIs. Through engagement with community members in civic activities, the civic knowledge gap of students (Shiller, 2013) is closed, thereby, enhancing their civic interest and participation. The civic knowledge construct was made up of five items that was adapted from the civic knowledge constructs of Isac, Maslowski and van der Werf (2011). Sample item in this construct was, "civic knowledge is essential for students' civic participation".

Our study acknowledge the application of civic knowledge in a practical setting and within a learning or service environment as important in defining *civic skills*. The relationship between civic engagement and civic skills has been espoused by Forestiere (2015, 456) who argues that "civic-engagement activities pursued by students in college are seen to produce a certain set of skills that students can utilize in their lives". We measured the items in the civic skills construct by adapting five



items from the active and engaged citizenship constructs of Zaff, Boyd, Li, Lerner and Lerner (2010). Sample item in this construct was, “civic skills enhances the expression of opinion among students”.

We developed the *social responsibility* construct based on our review of the transformative theory that explains that social responsibility serves as a motivating factor for students to undertake civic activities. One of the challenges of social responsibility is civic knowledge gap (Shiller, 2013) which could cause apathy, indifference, unpatriotic behaviours and neglect of important national commitments among students. The development of students must emphasise commitment to social and civic action (Banks, 2002) and the development of socially responsive knowledge (Altman, 1996). The social responsibility construct was gauged by adapting items from the civic responsibility construct (Lenzi et al., 2014) and the Youth Social Responsibility Scale (Pancer et al., 2007).

In developing the civic culture constructs, we identify the values, norms and knowledge that define individual commitment to promoting public good without asking for reward as essential. Importantly, when students engage with colleagues from other race or ethnic groups, their learning and cognitive growth is enhanced through new information and experience (Denson & Bowman, 2013). We therefore adapted two important domains – political efficacy and social cohesion (Andrews, Cowell & Downe, 2011) to develop the construct for civic culture. Sample item in this construct was, “a strong civic culture promotes civic engagement on campus”.

Cultural diversity in the context of civic engagement in higher education represent the different facets of students in relation to ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds. Bowman (2011) showed that diversity experiences are directly related to increases in civic attitudes, behaviours and behavioural intentions. Significantly, the recognition of the social and cultural differences among students (Whitley & Yoder, 2015; Zempter, 2018) could lead to enhanced intellectual engagement, motivation and tolerance of diverse opinions. Three items in the cultural diversity construct were adapted from the openness to diversity construct by Denson and Bowman (2013) while the remaining two were developed from the theory we reviewed.

The concept of *students as partners* defines the ecology of participation in a higher education setting (Taylor & Bovill, 2018) where students are involved in the development and implementation of programmes that enhance their knowledge and skills. Partnership could be described as a form of students’ engagement (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014; Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2016) including civic activities (through formal or non-formal modes). In developing the construct, we posit that, one of the solutions to societal problems is to acknowledge deliberations, agreement and partnerships as important to enhancing students’ civic activities. All the items in the students as partners construct were developed based on the transformative learning theory we reviewed.

Sequel to the steps used in developing the research instruments, we followed a principal component analysis (PCA) to gauge the uniqueness of the factors: Civic engagement (CVE); Students as partners (SAP); Civic culture (CUL); Civic knowledge (KNO); Civic skills (SKI); Social responsibility (RES) and Diversity experience (DIV) that explain the different elements that promote civic engagement among students in higher education. We adopted the PCA as a dimension reduction method of multi-variate statistics which also analyses the different factors (see Cohen et. al., 2011) that affect students' civic engagement in HEIs and the underlying structure in the data. A two-way between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) was also performed to gauge the effect of gender and age on students' civic interest in HEIs. Construct validity and internal validity in this study were demonstrated by way of the development and use of questionnaires and interview schedules that was devoid of bias, open and non-prejudicial (Cohen et al., 2011). We ensured validity of the research process through the application of methodological and data triangulation. Additionally, we computed reliability of the constructs in the survey using Cronbach's alpha while crystallisation was used in the development of codes, patterns and themes. We followed the rules of research ethics by seeking institutional clearance for the study from the university and also seeking the consent of respondents and interviewees prior to the interviews. We also ensured the confidentiality of the information provided by respondents by storing our datasets in a safe place while access to the database was limited to the researchers.

## Results

### Analysis of the quantitative data

In order to ascertain the internal consistencies of the measurement constructs, we performed a reliability test by way of Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) on all the constructs. Importantly, all the measurement constructs showed acceptable internal consistencies ( $\alpha_{CVE} = 0.82$ ,  $\alpha_{SAP} = 0.79$ ,  $\alpha_{CUL} = 0.74$ ,  $\alpha_{KNO} = 0.76$ ,  $\alpha_{SKI} = 0.72$ ,  $\alpha_{RES} = 0.84$  and  $\alpha_{DIV} = 0.89$ ) as presented in Table 1. We further computed the composite reliability and compared the values obtained to the threshold of 0.70 as recommended by Hair, Hult, Ringle and Sarstedt (2014). Significantly, all Cronbach Alpha coefficients and composite reliability indicators were above the 0.7 stipulated threshold ( $CR \Rightarrow 0.85$ ,  $\alpha \Rightarrow 0.74$ ) (see Hair et al., 2014). The square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVEs) were also computed (as shown in Table 1) for the confirmation of discriminant validity which is recommended to be above the correlations between the constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2014).

**Table 1: Correlation Matrix with CA, CR, AVE, Mean and Standard Deviation**

	CA ( $\alpha$ )	CR	AVE	MEAN	STDEV
<b>CVE</b>	0.827	0.895	0.629	4.283	0.464
<b>SAP</b>	0.798	0.875	0.552	4.135	0.446
<b>CUL</b>	0.737	0.855	0.523	4.090	0.480

<b>KNO</b>	0.762	0.869	0.541	4.182	0.414
<b>SKI</b>	0.729	0.848	0.503	3.956	0.382
<b>RES</b>	0.839	0.900	0.642	4.172	0.494
<b>DIV</b>	0.887	0.935	0.742	4.212	0.488

Correlations are significant at the  $p < 0.01$  level.

CA - Cronbach's Alpha

CR - Composite Reliability

AVE - Average Variance Extracted (square root)

STDEV - Standard Deviation

Table 1 shows detailed information on the mean scores and the standard deviation with CVE (M=4.28, SD=0.46) revealing high mean values while the lowest mean value was SKI (M=3.96, SD=0.38). We provide information on the strength of relationship between the seven variables as demonstrated in Table 1. As presented in Table 1, a statistically significant relationship was observed between CVE and SAP ( $r = 0.61$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The correlation is interpreted as respondents who indicated strong incline to civic engagement and the responsibilities of students and education providers to its promotion also considered institutional commitment as important in developing students' interest in civic activities. The result explains 37% ( $R^2 = 0.37$ ) of the variance. The data sets in Table 1 showed a significant relationship between RES and DIV ( $r = 0.78$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), KNO and SKI ( $r = 0.63$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) CVE and RES ( $r = 0.59$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and SAP and CUL ( $r = 0.55$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). What the result means is that 61% ( $R^2 = 0.61$ ) of the variance in the respondents' perception of social responsibility in the context of civic engagement could be explained by the diversity experience of students in the university. Similarly, 35% ( $R^2 = 0.35$ ) of the variance in the respondents' thoughts of civic engagement in the institution could be explained by their understanding of social responsibility in the context of civic engagement in the institution. The relationship between KNO and SKI, 40% ( $R^2 = 0.40$ ) also revealed that the variance in the respondents' understanding of civic knowledge and its effect on civic engagement could be explained by their understanding of civic skills and its importance in civic activities. Essentially, all the variables (CVE, SAP, CUL, KNO, SKI, RES and DIV) demonstrated positive statistically significant relationships as shown in Table 1.

We proceeded to test for the suitability of the data for factorization by way of the Bartlett test of sphericity and the Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (Williams, Onsman & Brown, 2010). While the Bartlett test of sphericity was adopted to measure the correlations between variables, the Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was computed to correlate the pairs of variables which also required variables to be statistically significant with an overall measure of 0.6 or higher (Cohen et al., 2011). Markedly, the Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy with a value of 0.840 and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity of ( $\chi^2 = 824.243$ , d.f. = 21, significance = 0.000) suggest that the correlations between the seven variables are explained by various variables in the

dataset. Seeing that the data was suitable for factorisation, the researchers proceeded to extract the factors.

#### Factor extraction and rotation

We adopted the principal component analysis with varimax rotation and Kaiser Normalisation purposely in order to obtain theoretically analogous and significant factors underlying students' understanding and involvement in civic activities in higher education as well as the institutional commitment to promoting civic activities on campus. Importantly, we ensured that eigenvalues generated that were equal to or greater than 1.00 served as the basis for determining the number of factors to use for the analysis. The 35 items used in the orthogonal rotation produced seven factors that accounted for 16.08, 10.20, 8.20, 7.59, 7.16, 6.49 and 3.88 percent of the total variance explained.

**Table 2: Civic engagement Rotated Component Matrix**

DESCRIPTORS	ITEM	Component		
		CVE	SAP	CUL
Civic engagement represents an obligation to serve society	CVE1	0.634		
Civic engagement enhances my community service skills	CVE2	0.643		
Civic engagement should be taught in HEIs	CVE3	0.669		
Civic engagement connects HEIs to society for joint activities	CVE4	0.766		
Civic engagement provides students an opportunity to serve others	CVE5	0.747		
HEIs obligation to lead various civic engagement activities	SAP1		0.654	
Civic engagement should be taught as course	SAP2		0.565	
Civic activities should be led by lecturers	SAP3		0.657	
Developing policies on civic engagement	SAP4		0.523	
Institutional support for civic engagement activities	SAP5		0.653	
Existence of a strong civic engagement culture on campus.	CUL1			0.616
I developed a civic engagement culture outside this institution	CUL2			0.747
A strong civic culture promotes civic engagement on campus	CUL3			0.590
A strong civic culture creates a sense of civic responsibility	CUL4			0.526
Institution should help students to develop a strong civic culture	CUL5			0.505
Civic knowledge is derived from information received from others	KNO1			
Civic knowledge promotes students' democratic values	KNO2			
Civic knowledge is essential for social cohesion and coexistence	KNO3			
Civic knowledge enhances my rights, responsibilities and duties	KNO4			
Civic knowledge stimulates my interest in community engagement	KNO5			
Civic skills enhances my ability to interact with community leaders	SKI1			
Civic skills enhances the expression of opinion among students	SKI2			
Civic skills is necessary for active participation in civic activities	SKI3			
My understanding of civic skills includes community activities	SKI4			
Civic skills could also serve as employability skills	SKI5			
Civic knowledge and skills are essential for solving social problems	RES1			
Civic engagement provides students with the needs of society	RES2			
Civic engagement strengthens student-community relationship	RES3			

Students' attitudes underpins a sense of social responsibility	RES4
Civic engagement leads to responsible adulthood	RES5
Cultural diversity experience enhances students' civic participation	DIV1
Cultural diversity experience increases my intercultural knowledge	DIV2
Cultural diversity experience enhances students' leadership skills	DIV3
Cultural diversity experience enhances interpersonal relationships	DIV4
Intercultural awareness enhances cultural diversity experience	DIV5

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. 7 components extracted.

The rotated component matrix was categorised based on the descriptors, items and components as exhibited in Table 2. Significantly, all components demonstrated values above 0.5 therefore providing a coherent explanation for the factors extracted. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the output from the correlation matrix and the rotated component matrix provides strong support to the theoretical explanation that civic engagement is enhanced by the six other factors (SAP, CUL, KNO, SKI, RES and DIV). Following the PCA computed, we proceeded to perform a two-way between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) purposely to examine the effect of gender and age on students' civic interest in HEIs as shown on table 3.

Table 3: Two-way ANOVA and p-values for Age and Gender

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	12.81a	21	0.61	4.69	0.00	0.29
Intercept	673.41	1	673.41	5178.33	0.00	0.96
AGE	0.14	1	0.14	1.08	0.30	0.00
GENDER	1.61	2	0.80	6.19	0.00	0.05
Within group error	31.08	239	0.13			
Total	4831.16	261				

a. R Squared = .292 (Adjusted R Squared = .230)

The computed F-statistic revealed  $F(21, 239) = 7.387$ , with p-value,  $p=0.001$ . The results further showed a statistically significant effect of gender on students' civic interest and participation ( $F=6.186$ ,  $p=0.002$ ) although the effect size was small (partial eta squared =0.049). The effect of age on students' civic interest ( $F=1.077$ ,  $p=0.301$ ) was not statistically significant.

## Interviews

This section reports on the interviews with students and a management staff of the university. The interview session with students sought to gather information on how their civic knowledge and skills were derived from four aspects: institutional civic culture (ethos); cultural diversity experience; social

responsibility and; partnership. We commenced the interview by inquiring from students, their opinions on the institutional ethos that support civic engagement.

The development of students' civic knowledge and skills through institutional civic culture, structures and support remain an important element of civic engagement activities in HEIs. This view was shared by one of the interviewees who stated that, "the university has been supporting students to develop their civic knowledge and skills through non-credit and non-grade awarding learning activities. Most of this activities are however initiated by the students through the various associations" [Emmanuel]. A different view was shared by another interviewee who indicated that, "in my opinion, we should experience practical civic engagement in the communities around the university.....I think that it should be an entirely practice-based learning and led by our lecturers" [Abena].

Beyond institutional ethos is the development of a civic culture among students that is essential to civic engagement. An interviewee asserted that, "as a Muslim and based on our teachings, I consider civic engagement as the process of connecting individuals in society with one another, to share common interest and work for the common good" [Sylla]. He added that,

[a]t the tertiary level, Muslims are highly advised to join Muslim Groups on campus and to volunteer in all activities organised by the executives....this is meant to develop the civic knowledge, skills and experiences of its members. These activities include clean up exercises, raising funds to support a programme or project, joint programs with other groups on campus, encouraging members to run for student offices, speak to members on the importance of voting among many others [Sylla].

The views of Sylla was also shared by another interviewee who asserted that his group's commitment to civic engagement was based on religious obligation. He noted that,

[a]t ACF we consider civic service as an obligation to God and humanity and this is one of our main motivation for engaging in some civic activities. We also acknowledge the fact the some people within our community are poor and need the support of other people. Secondly, we consider service to society and the needy as important to serving humanity. We develop our civic knowledge and skills from our homes and communities through interaction and other activities [Emmanuel].

The integration of individuals who are from different tribes and who speak different languages is essential for the promotion of cultural diversity in HEIs. Significantly, diversity experience in HEIs is important for the promotion of civic engagement among students. An interviewee stated that,

[t]he International Students Association recognizes diversity experience as one of the factors in civic engagement because it allows some of us from other countries and backgrounds to support in civic activities. I think that Civic activities should not only

focus on external communities and partnerships but also within campus and that has been one of our resolve – to support international students with different needs [Stephane].

Another interviewee stated that, “we often engage in outreach programmes as a way of reaching out to society which is based on religious and moral obligation. We identify specific projects in the community that we can offer support to individuals” [Emmanuel].

The different needs of individuals in the community and society further call for students and HEIs to consider civic engagement as a social responsibility. One of the interviewees asserted that, “to be engaged with a social activity means to care about your community, work with others to establish a more positive place to live, work and support other people as an obligation based on religion” [Sylla]. Another interviewee opined that civic interest is shaped by individual orientation to support the community and volunteer to help others in need. She added that, “I have set up my own volunteer entity (Girly Tech) that train girls in different computer coding languages, basic Computing skills, organizing, boot camps and visiting Technology hubs and Technology companies. The emphasis is to develop the interest of female students in STEM” [Faisal]. She further noted that, “I developed my civic knowledge and skills when I became an Autism Ambassador in Ghana and I started providing the needed support to children with autism.....I must say that, it really spurred me to commit myself to more civic activities” [Faisal]. The views of Faisal suggest that students become socially responsive when they identify a need in society and they may develop the necessary knowledge and skills to provide the necessary support.

Beyond social responsibility is the partnership that students enter into when they commit to civic activities. The partnership are often with the HEI, community and government organizations. Such partnerships and internal structures also define how the campus ethos support student civic engagement activities. An interviewee noted that, “the university through the students’ affairs office provide the structure for student groups to undertake civic activities that promotes their civic knowledge and skills” [Nana Akua]. The head of students’ Affairs Office of the university noted that,

[o]ur office continue to partner students in diverse ways to support the society with the knowledge, skills and experience they obtain from their study here. She added that, we have even supported a student who graduated a few years ago with Computers and funds to set up an IT training facility in a village. We continue to collaborate with various groups and associations on campus to undertake civic activities. We also encourage students to carry out civic activities on their own and example of such initiatives is when we informed students to join in the Easter soup kitchen as volunteers and transported them to the activity grounds. The students had a good experience and they came back with positive feedback [Evelyn].

While partnerships remain pivotal to the promotion of civic engagement among students, the campus ethos is expected to provide a culture of civic engagement that will see increasing numbers of students carry out civic activities. The head of students' Affairs Office noted that,

[t]he university continues to partner students in performing various civic functions as well as providing them with other assistance that seeks to develop them into socially responsible adults. Students these days do not commit themselves to civic activities and in instances where you attempt to convince them, they inquire of the benefits they will derive from such activities. I think that a lot of students are self-centered and are indifferent towards activities that support public good" [Evelyn].

## **Discussion**

This study was designed to examine the aspects that enhance the development of students' interest and participation in civic activities in an HEI setting. In providing answers to our first research question, the quantitative data analysed revealed that all the factors: civic culture; students as partners; civic knowledge; civic skills; social responsibility and diversity experience demonstrated strong effect on civic engagement in the HEI studied. However, the results revealed that by emphasising three major factors: students as partners, social responsibility and cultural diversity experience, HEIs could develop a campus climate that enhances students' interest and participation in civic activities. In relation to the social-cognitive theory, the results showed that, through personal and collective agency, students are motivated to develop their civic knowledge and civic skills. Additionally, a strong institutional civic ethos enhances the development of students' civic knowledge and skills through shared norms, group goals and synergies. The power of students to enter into partnership with communities through collaboration and negotiation enhance their sense of social responsibility and their engagement with colleagues from diverse cultures. This outcome demonstrates the significance of transformative learning in shaping our understanding of the aspects that enhance civic participation among students.

Our results further show that the university environment remains a relevant space for enhancing students' civic knowledge and skills, diversity experience and social responsibility tenets through the provision of access to social networks and resources, including information. The responses from the interviewees demonstrate that a supportive university civic environment enhances aspects such, interaction among peers during civic activities, engagement with community members and special teaching sessions to inculcate in them the importance of volunteerism and civic engagement. Research by Thomas and others (2019) revealed the importance of recognising the power of students to enter into partnership with local communities with the aim of driving social change. Conversely, when providers of education do not create an environment that supports interaction, negotiation and partnership between students and local communities, students will not develop the civic knowledge and skills required to



support social change activities. Education remains a change mechanism for transforming the knowledge and skills of students (Handa, 2018; Toukan, 2018) to acquire humanistic values that are necessary to transform societies and meeting the goals of SDG4. Additionally, the mission of HEIs should include an effort to develop civic engagement practices among students (Boland, 2014; Hoffman, 2015; Hylton, 2018; Forestiere, 2015) in order to build them into responsible adults. Consistent with previous research findings, this study revealed that the civic knowledge of students is derived from: active scholarly engagement (Fitzgerald et al, 2016); engagement opportunities (Hylton, 2018); extra-curricular activities (Quinn & Bauml, 2018) and information received from other people. Lenzi and others (2014) contribute to the debate on campus civic climate by arguing that when students perceive high levels of democratic and open climate in their institutions, they willingly express their opinion on social issues and their motivation to support activities that are aimed at resolving societal problem is increased.

Students' civic skills serve as an important tool for performing civic activities and it defines the application of knowledge through engagement, interaction, and teaching sessions. Results from the interviews show the civic skills students develop when they engage in volunteer activities either on campus or in communities. The responses of the students revealed that, the sources of civic skills include the community, family, institutions of learning, religious gathering and other social settings. The views of Evelyn regarding the institutions' effort at organising students to volunteer during Easter soup kitchen shows a conscious attempt by the university to help develop the civic skills of students. These findings are consistent with those of other authors who argue that civic skills promote the development of individuals to acquire critical skills that are essential for adulthood (Forestiere, 2015; Shiller, 2013; Quinn & Bauml, 2018). When students do not engage in civic activities, they have fewer opportunities to develop relevant skills such as leadership skills, interpersonal interaction skills, critical thinking skills and community mobilization skills. Our results show that membership of different associations and groups such as religious associations and students' faculty associations among others promote the public good in the form of support to other communities while it also strengthens the civic culture among students. Andrews and others (2011) argue that, one of the tenets of civic culture is that, citizens are prepared to engage in civic activities with a strong belief in the value and efficacy of their participation.

Cultural diversity experience remains a quintessential factor in the promotion of civic activities among students in HEI settings, especially in developing countries and multicultural environments. When a conducive environment that allows associations to coalesce the knowledge and skills of students from different backgrounds through civic engagement is not provided, students are prevented from gathering the cultural diversity experiences that are relevant for community, national and global development. These results are evidenced by reports of other researchers who suggest that students' intercultural knowledge and understanding (Ehrlich, 2000; Whitley & Yoder, 2015), global knowledge

(Toukan, 2018) and transnational efficacy (Lorenzini, 2013) enhance cultural diversity experience. The responsibility of students towards others in society is shaped by their orientation to be responsive to the needs of individuals and community. Expectedly, all our interviewees identified civic engagement as a social obligation. The results also demonstrate that, a sense of social responsibility is developed by students through the knowledge and experience they gather as well as the expectations of society on them to support their community, country and the world. This view is shared by Banks (2002, 32) who argues that developing students for responsible future roles include teaching them “to know, to care, and to act in ways that will develop and foster a democratic and just society”. Similarly, Crocetti, Jahromi and Meeus (2012) showed that there is a relationship between social responsibility, future volunteerism and political participation among young generations. What motivates students to be socially responsible is the value orientation that is connected to moral, prosocial and civic behaviours (Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). We posit that an open and responsive university environment should provide a conducive space that promotes students’ sense of social responsibility to support their community.

In providing answers to the third research question, we show that the culture of civic engagement transcends formal arrangements by lecturers to develop the civic knowledge, skills and experiences of students to include the creation of an environment that recognises students as partners in the promotion of civic activities on campus. Our interview with staff of the university revealed that when a university creates appropriate structures to support students to develop their civic knowledge and skills through partnerships, students develop a sense of ownership of the learning process and build their confidence by negotiating for resource support in their civic activities. This argument is advanced extensively by Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten (2014) who argue that the benefits of partnership between institutions, staff and students consist of enhanced engagement, motivation and learning; enhanced student–staff relationships and development of a range of graduate attributes; enhanced teaching and classroom experiences among other things. Our results further revealed some challenges HEIs face in working with students as partners in promoting civic activities, especially as many students do not participate in civic activities. Notwithstanding these challenges, when institutions engage students as co-learners, co-researchers, co-inquirers, co-developers, and co-designers (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2016, p.2) through the development of a strong campus ethos (Zhen, 2017), it underpins the relevance of students as partners as a concept in promoting students’ interest in civic activities. Additionally, the concept of students as partners require a culture of civic engagement where students understand the processes and purposes of their engagement within a broad institutional framework that is open and supportive of students’ civic activities.

## Limitations and implications for future research

We highlight some limitations of the current study and provide recommendations for future research. First, due to the cross-sectional data that was gathered and analysed, we are unable to make causal inferences about the cause and effect of the aspects that enhance students' civic engagement. Although all the aspects gauged strongly influence students' civic participation in HEIs, it is possible that other socio-economic conditions as well as changes in the environment of students over time could alter students' perception regarding the drivers of civic engagement. It will therefore be important to consider a longitudinal study that will address these gaps in future research. Another limitation of the study is our use of data from only one university in Ghana. A recommendation for further research in this regard pertains to a comparison of different universities based on factors such as students' demographics, size of institution and the level of institutional support for civic activities. Lastly, we sampled only students who were actively involved in civic activities on campus for our interviews. This means that the opinion of other students who are apathetic towards civic activities were not considered in this study. Future research could consider a focus group discussion that will bring to the fore the views of other students.

## Conclusion

This study examined the aspects that enhance students' civic interest and participation in civic activities through the lenses of social-cognitive and transformative learning theories. We show that aspects such as, civic culture, students as partners, civic knowledge, civic skills, social responsibility and diversity experience enhance students' interest and participation in civic activities. Markedly, the establishment of an institutional ethos promote networks of social relationships and interaction among students, grant them power to enter into partnership with communities through collaboration and negotiation and, make available social resources serve as antecedents for enhancing civic interest and participation. We established that, the motivation of students to engage in civic activities is strongly influenced by cultural diversity experience, social responsibility and the recognition of students as partners in civic activities. When HEIs develop their institutional ethos to accommodate only formal civic engagement curriculum without allowing for student groups and associations to experience the informal curriculum, certain benefits such as cultural diversity experience elude these students. Additionally, when students participate in civic activities, they contribute to meeting the GCED agenda of developing citizens who are prepared to respond to issues of inequality, poverty and human rights violation that portent world peace and sustainability. Finally, while the background orientation of students, their prior civic knowledge, skills, experiences and cultural diversity experiences matter in their participation in civic activities, a deeper sense of social responsibility is inculcated in students when providers of education identify students as partners in the promotion of civic engagement.

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