EFFECTS OF EMPOWERMENT ON STUDENT EDUCATIONAL SATISFACTION AND COMMITMENT TO CONTINUE STUDIES: A STUDY AMONG INDIAN COMMERCE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The trends of "for-profit organizations" in the education sector have started taking place in India. It is important to improve the student retention because it has a negative impact on the revenues and the bottom lines of the educational institutions. Empowerment holds a great promise for colleges and universities because it can be used to improve students' perceived educational satisfaction and commitment to continue their studies at the same college/university. The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of empowerment on students' educational satisfaction and commitment to continue their studies at the same college/university. This study consists of a population of undergraduate students enrolled in the business management programs at colleges and universities in Punjab and Delhi areas of India. A survey research (a non-experimental field study design) was utilized. A convenience sampling method was applied to select and recruit the research participants. Data were collected using questionnaires. To test the hypotheses, p < .05 significance level was used to accept or reject a null hypothesis. Positive

relationships between i) students' perceived empowerment and students' perceived educational satisfaction and ii) students' perceived empowerment and students' perceived commitment to continue their studies at the same college/university were found. This study contributes to the literature on the factors that affect students' educational satisfaction and commitment to continue their studies at the same college/university. The findings may be useful for the colleges/universities and instructors/professors.

KEYWORDS: *empowerment, student educational satisfaction, student commitment.*

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of empowerment on students' perceived educational satisfaction and commitment to continue their studies at the same college/university. The trends of "for-profit organizations" in the education sector have started taking place in India. Choudaha (2010) indicates that Indian education sector has gained significant attention from investors in year 2009. Since trends of "for-profit" organizations have started taking place, it is important to improve the student retention because it has a negative impact on the revenues and the bottom lines of the educational institutions.

Although, students represent an important source of revenue, they create some challenges for colleges/universities because of different learning styles. Asian students from different geographic areas have different behaviors, cultures, attitudes, and learning styles (Gill et al., 2008), which in turn, lead to student leadership issues and challenges for instructors/professors (Salvarajah, 2006). When instructors/professors are unable to overcome with the leadership issues, students tend to withdrawal from the education program which is not in the favor of the educational institutions. The higher withdrawal rates from degree programs can be due to students' dissatisfaction with the education they receive and the lack of commitment to continue their studies at the same college/university.

The declining retention rate in institutions for higher learning is not a new problem but it has been recognized major issues for colleges and universities (Scoggin and Styron, 2006). Lauerman (2010) indicates that about 57 percent of students at 16 for-profit colleges who started classes in the 2008-2009 academic year dropped out from the education program. Although, for decades, getting more students into colleges and universities has been the top priority of India's higher education leaders, the reality is that a few who go to college/university finish a degree. Therefore, it is important to find strategies that improve students' perceived educational satisfaction and commitment to continue studies at the same college/university, which in turn, will help to improve student retention.

Increased student retention does not only increase tuition revenues but also provides some synergy for recruitment through low-cost word of mouth recommendation promotion activities. In addition, the probability of retaining a student at a particular college or university increases if the student stays longer at that institution, because of the higher student transaction cost to switch to a competing institution (Kara and DeShields, Jr., 2004). Therefore, it is important to

improve students' educational satisfaction and commitment to continue their studies at the same college/university.

Empowerment holds a great promise for colleges and universities because it can be used to improve students' perceived educational satisfaction and commitment to continue their studies at the same college/university. The term "empowerment" in management literature appears to have come into general usage in the early 1980s (Collins, 1999). The term "empowerment" refers to an individual's belief in his/her ability to exercise choice and to make decisions. Student empowerment, in the context of this study, is defined as the extent to which students feel that their instructors/professors i) permit them to use their own intelligence to solve study problems, ii) encourage them to handle their study problems, iii) trust their intelligence, and iv) allow them freedom in their study.

Since empowerment holds a great promise for improving students' perceived educational satisfaction and commitment to continue their studies, the purpose of this study is to explore these affects and relationships on the Indian undergraduate commerce students. The Indian undergraduate commerce students were chosen as a sampling frame because empowerment concepts are new to them. There are a very few schools that use empowerment concepts at the senior secondary school level.

There has been a very little research conducted to test the relationships between i) empowerment and students' perceived educational satisfaction and ii) empowerment and students' commitment to continue their studies at the same college/university. However, authors such as Fulford and Eng (1995), McQuillan (2005), Francis (2008), Dickson and Lorenz (2009), and Yunus et al. (2010) have tested relationship between empowerment and the satisfaction of employees and students. In addition, Fulford and Eng (1995), Dee et al. (2003), Bogler and Somech (2004), and Kuo et al. (2010) have tested relationships between empowerment and commitment of employees and students. The results can be generalized to the educational services industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE RELATIONS OF EMPOWERMENT WITH STUDENT EDUCATIONAL SATISFACTION

Students are considered as the main customers in higher institutions of education as their needs (e.g., the need to acquire high quality education, a valuable educational experience, etc.) would have to be fulfilled by the relevant parties [e.g., administrative employees, instructors/professors, etc.] (Yunus et al., 2010). It is accepted that educational institutions have many customers: students, staff, faculty, alumni, donors, and others. A drop in student retention without a compensating enrollment increase impacts all the above customers (Kara and DeShields, Jr., 2004). Therefore, it is important to improve student educational satisfaction.

Student empowerment seems a logical reaction to current demands for college/university reform and accountability to student perceived educational satisfaction. One can understand a lack of student engagement in learning, for instance, as a reaction to a lack of empowerment. Because of denied formal power in the classroom, students frequently disengage from learning (McQuillan, 2005) which has a negative impact on students' educational satisfaction.

According to Francis (2008), providing empowerment to students is a potential mechanism for increasing their satisfaction with their education program and environment. McQuillan (2005) indicates that the empowered students internalize higher level cognitive skills and assume greater control over setting their own learning goals, which in turn, improve student educational satisfaction. Fulford and Eng (1995) describes that empowerment has a great impact on perceived satisfaction of service employees. Yunus et al. (2010) found a positive relationship between empowerment and student satisfaction. Dickson and Lorenz (2009) also found a positive relationship between psychological empowerment and job satisfaction.

If one believes knowledge is power, it seems reasonable to assume that, at its heart, colleges/universities should be empowering students to improve their perceived educational satisfaction. While few would deny this assertion, "student empowerment" may be one of the most important tools to improve students' perceived educational satisfaction. Therefore, it is theorized that student empowerment where implemented should show improved student perceived educational satisfaction. Accordingly the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: The higher the level of empowerment, the higher the level of students' perceived educational satisfaction.

THE IMPACT OF EMPOWERMENT ON STUDENT COMMITMENT TO CONTINUE STUDIES

Students' commitment to continue their studies is defined as a psychological attachment to their educational institutions; that is, if students feel indifference or negatively about their attachment to a college/university, they will feel lower levels of commitment. Lower level of commitment causes high student turnover. Past research within the management literature notes that the exchange relationship exists between the individual and the organization in that commitment is exchanged for desirable outcomes (Flaherty and Pappas, 2000). In other words, if students receive a sense of satisfaction from their education (input from an educational institution), they are likely to repay the educational institutions with increased commitment (input from students) to continue their studies. Therefore, from an educational institution perspective, it is clear that the outcomes of empowerment (e.g., the positive attitudes of students toward study programs) are beneficial. The role of empowerment, in this context, is that it enhances students' commitment to continue their studies at their educational institutions.

Fulford and Eng (1995) found significant impact of empowerment on perceived loyalty of service employees. Dee et al. (2003) found a positive impact of empowerment on commitment in the educational institutions. Bogler and Somech (2004) investigated that teachers' perceptions of their level of empowerment are significantly related to their feelings of commitment to the educational organization. Kuo et al. (2010) found that empowerment generates a positive and direct influence on employees' commitment.

Students, in general, and commerce students, in particular, are subjected to the constant pressure of schoolwork, friends, instructors/professors, tests, quizzes, papers, and many times unplanned or unforeseen peaks in their study environments (Gill et al., 2010) - all of which negatively

impact on students' commitment to continue their studies. Empowerment has been found to improve commitment in the organizations. Therefore, it is theorized that educational institutions that empower students will see the higher level of commitment than the institution that does not empower students. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: The higher the level of empowerment, the higher the level of students' perceived commitment to continue studies at the same college/university.

METHODS

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study utilized survey research, a descriptive field study design. To test the hypotheses, $p < .05$ significance level was used to accept or reject a null hypothesis.

MEASUREMENT

In order to remain (for comparison and reference reasons) consistent with previous research, the measures were taken from three referent studies, which in turn are based on previous studies in marketing, education, and psychology. All measures pertaining to i) student empowerment were taken from Hartline and Ferrell (1996), ii) student educational satisfaction were taken from Gill et al. (2010), and iii) student commitment to continue studies were taken from Gill et al. (2009).

All the scale items were pre-tested for construct validity. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with each item (statement), using a five-point Likert scale providing an interval level of measurement.

Student empowerment (SE) is operationalized as the extent to which students feel that their instructors/professors i) permit them to use their own intelligence to solve study problems, ii) encourage them to handle their study problems, iii) trust their intelligence, and iv) allow them freedom in their study. Hartline and Ferrell (1996) used the eight-item tolerance-of-freedom scale, which measures the degree to which managers encourage initiative, give employees freedom, and trust employees to use their own judgment. Based on confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) loading scores, four items were selected to measure the "SE" dimension. Scale items were reworded to apply to students in the education industry and the reliability (internal consistency) of these re-worded items was re-tested. The Cronbach alpha on the responses of the thirty one commerce students who participated in the pre-test of the above scale items was 0.73.

Student Educational Satisfaction (SES) is operationalized as the extent to which students are satisfied with: i) the help they receive from their instructor/professor to understand course materials, ii) the quality of education, and iii) learning experience. Gill et al. (2010) used three items to measure student's educational satisfaction. Based on the CFA reported by Gill et al. (2010), all three items were used to measure "SES" variable. Scale items were reworded to apply to students in the education field and the reliability of these re-worded items was re-tested. The Cronbach alpha on the responses of the thirty one commerce students who participated in the pre-test of the above scale items was 0.87.

Students' commitment to continue their studies (SC) variable is operationalized as the extent to which students tell their friends that their college/university is a great place to study and plan to continue study at the same college/university to earn a higher degree in the future. Gill et al. (2009) used the three-item tolerance-of-freedom scale, which measures the "students' commitment to continue their studies" at the same colleges/universities. We used two items to measure the "students' commitment to continue their studies" variable. Scale items were reworded to apply to students in the education industry and the reliability of these re-worded items was re-tested. The Cronbach alpha on the responses of the thirty one commerce students who participated in the pre-test of the above scale items was 0.76.

SAMPLE

Punjab (Chandigarh, Ludhiana, and Banga) and Delhi areas of India were chosen as the research site to collect data. Given that the population is "abstract" (i.e., it was not possible to obtain a list of all members of the focal population) (Huck, 2008, p. 101), a non-probability (purposive) sample was obtained. In a purposive sample, participants are screened for inclusion based on criteria associated with members of the focal population. The focal population was comprised of undergraduate level commerce students in the Punjab and Delhi areas of India. The survey did not need to be translated into Punjabi or Hindi for the Indian participants since all the commerce students can read and write English. The instruction sheet indicated that participants could contact the researchers by telephone and/or email regarding any questions or concerns they might have about the research.

An exhaustive list of commerce colleges and universities in the Punjab and Delhi areas of India was created to enable trained volunteers to contact, screen, and invite qualified commerce students to participate. Survey questionnaire bundles coupled with an instruction sheet were provided to participating volunteers for distribution.

Approximately 1,100 surveys were distributed and 327 surveys were returned, 20 of which were not usable, for an overall response rate of roughly 30%.

STUDY PROCEDURES

CONFIDENTIALITY

Participants were assured that their names would not be disclosed and that confidentiality would be strictly maintained. In addition, participants were explicitly asked not to disclose their names on the questionnaire, and were free to decline responding to any survey question that they felt might reveal their identity.

Student Consent Letter specifically indicated that by completing the survey, subjects have consented to participate in the study. Any information that will be obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with subjects will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with subjects' permission or as required by law.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

Measures of central tendency, variance, skewness, and kurtosis were calculated on responses to all of the items. Skewness measures for all of the items were within the range of: -0.777 to -1.069, which is considered to be an excellent range for most research that requires using statistics appropriate to normal distributions. Therefore, we used statistics that assume scalar values and symmetric distributions to test our hypothesis.

Using a principle component rotation and a varimax rotation, we ran a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) on the nine items. Three factors explained 93.60% of the variance in the nine items (see Table 1), and all of the items were loaded on the expected factors (see Table 2).

TABLE 1: TOTAL VARIANCE EXPLAINED – ROTATION SUMS OF SQUARE LOADINGS

Total Variance Explained			
Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings			
Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.657	40.634	40.634
2	2.852	31.692	72.326
3	1.915	21.273	93.599

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

TABLE 2: ROTATED COMPONENT MATRIX [A]

	Component		
	1	2	3
SE1) My immediate instructor permits me to use my own intelligence to solve study problems.	**0.943**	0.143	0.112
SE2) My immediate instructor encourages me to handle my study problems.	**0.938**	0.162	0.113
SE3) My immediate instructor trusts my intelligence.	**0.941**	0.145	0.111
SE4) My immediate instructor allows me freedom in my study.	**0.933**	0.147	0.122
SES1) I am satisfied with the help that I receive from my immediate Instructor.	0.183	**0.929**	0.243
SES2) I am satisfied with the quality of education provided by my immediate Instructor.	0.160	**0.936**	0.234

SES3) Overall, I am satisfied with my learning experience at this college/university.	0.165	**0.925**	0.231
SC1) I often tell my friends that this college/university is a great place to study.	0.134	0.301	**0.918**
SC2) I plan to continue study at this college/university to earn a higher degree in the future.	0.161	0.275	**0.923**

Notes: [a]Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

Rotation converged in 4 iterations.

Cronbach Alpha on the above indicated clusters of items: Empowerment 0.9699; and Student Educational Satisfaction 0.9736; Student Commitment 0.9480.

The question subsets were analyzed in order to enable the calculation of the weighted factor scores. In terms of these weighted factor score items: four empowerment, three student educational satisfaction, and two student commitment, loaded approximately equally.

TESTING OF HYPOTHESES, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMPOWERMENT AND STUDENT EDUCATIONAL SATISFACTION

A positive relationship between SE and SES (see Table 3) was found; that is, the improvement in the degree of perceived educational satisfaction of Indian undergraduate commerce students is related to the improvement in the degree of perceived empowerment. The findings of this paper support the findings of Fulford and Eng (1995), McQuillan (2005), Francis (2008), Dickson and Lorenz (2009), and Yunus et al. (2010) in which they found a positive relationship between empowerment and satisfaction.

TABLE 3: REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS [A, B, C]

$R^2 = 0.121$; SEE = 0.939; F = 42.06; ANOVA's Test = 0.000

Regression Equation: SES = 3.717 + 0.348 SE

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients [c]	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	3.717	0.054		0.000	1.000
SE	0.348	0.054	0.348	6.485	0.000

[a] Dependent Variable: SES

[b] Independent Variable: SE

[c] Linear Regression through the Origin

SEE = Standard Error of the Estimate

SES = Student Educational Satisfaction

SE = Student Empowerment

Note that around 12.10% ($R^2 = 0.121$) of the variance in the degree of Indian undergraduate student perceived educational satisfaction can be explained by the degree of empowerment.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OF EMPOWERMENT AND STUDENT COMMITMENT

A positive relationship between SE and SC (see Table 4) was found; that is, the improvement in the degree of perceived commitment of Indian undergraduate commerce students to continue their studies at the same college/university is related to the improvement in the degree of perceived empowerment. The results support the studies of Fulford and Eng (1995), Dee et al. (2003), Bogler and Somech (2004), and Kuo et al. (2010) in which they found positive relationships between empowerment and commitment.

TABLE 4: REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS [A, B, C]

$R^2 = 0.095$; SEE = 0.953; F = 31.83; ANOVA's Test = 0.000

Regression Equation: SES = -1.155 + 0.307 SE

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients [c]	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	-1.155	0.054		0.000	1.000
SE	0.307	0.054	0.307	5.642	0.000

[a] Dependent Variable: SC

[b] Independent Variable: SE

[c] Linear Regression through the Origin

SC = Student Commitment to Continue their Studies

Note that around 9.50% ($R^2 = 0.095$) of the variance in the degree of Indian undergraduate student perceived student commitment to continue their studies at the same college/university can be explained by the degree of empowerment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, empowerment improves Indian undergraduate students' perceived educational satisfaction and their commitment to continue studies at the same college/university. Students play a boundary-spanning role where they interact with many individuals from inside (fellow students, administrative staff, and instructors/professors) and outside (employers) their college/university (Gill et al., 2010). This large role set requires students to satisfy frequently variegated needs and expectations of multiple parties (only one of which is their instructor/professor), which lowers the students' perceived educational satisfaction and commitment to continue studies at the same college/university. Lower educational satisfaction and commitment leads to high student turnover which is not in the favor of educational institutions. Therefore, it is important for Indian colleges/universities to improve student perceived educational satisfaction and commitment, which in turn, improve student retention of Indian commerce students. The improvement in student retention will enhance revenues and consequently, the bottom line of the Indian educational institutions. Since empowerment improves the student perceived educational satisfaction and commitment, it important to implement it in the educational institutions.

IMPLEMENTATION OF EMPOWERMENT APPROACHES

Empowerment is a bottom-up process rather than something that can be formulated as a top-down strategy. Universities/colleges must train instructors/professors, clarify the responsibilities, and provide clear direction to the empowered students. It is also important to find student desire for empowerment before empowering them. Instructors/professors should learn to trust students, provide frequent feedback, and make students feel recognized for empowered behavior.

LIMITATIONS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study asks for responses from fixed format, set-questions survey tools, which could direct questions to the exclusion of providing additional input. A mail/drop off survey data collection method contributed to a low response rate or response error. Some favorable techniques such as including postage paid mail, sending a cover letter, providing a deadline for returning the survey, and promising anonymity were applied in order to increase the response rate. Maturation of participants can also affect the survey response rate. Maturation of participants, in the context of this research, means that some of the research participants may be on holidays. However, a short study period (four weeks) limited any negative effects from maturation.

The practical implications of this study are if Indian commerce students perceive that they are empowered at higher level, their educational satisfaction and commitment are perceived as higher level than if it is perceived as being used at lower level.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although, this study clearly shows that empowerment improves students' perceived educational satisfaction and commitment to continue studies at the same college/university, additional

research issues and questions must be addressed. The additional variables that should be researched include:

- The degree to which instructors/professors understand the consequences of empowerment, and

- The degree to which instructors/professors understand the desire of their students to be empowered.

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