Student Engagement and the Factors that Influence it: An Empirical Study

by Baldev R. Sharma & Savita Panwar

Abstract
The study reported in this paper is based on the premise that real and deep learning in the field of education takes place only when the students actively participate, not only cognitively but also emotionally and through concrete behaviour, in the process of learning. The emerging construct that encompasses this process of learning is called Student Engagement. To be sure attending classes and passing examinations also contribute to learning, but the lasting value of this process of acquiring knowledge is highly questionable. The present study, which is part of a series of studies of MBA students in different business schools, is based on a number of self-developed measuring instruments and covers an institute of management studies located in Rajasthan. The findings reveal the level of student engagement and also identify the critical predictors of engagement.

Keywords
Student Engagement; Predictors of Engagement; Self-Efficacy; Institutional Climate

Introduction
During the last 20 years or so, there has been unprecedented increase in the number of institutions awarding degrees or diplomas in the field of management education in India. As a result of the recent down-turn of the Indian economy, further growth of such institutions has slowed down somewhat. But an MBA degree or its equivalent PGDM is still the most sought-after option for young men and women coming out of colleges across the nation. As a parallel development, a whole new industry has come up, which rates and ranks hundreds of business schools in terms of their quality. Each rating agency uses its own set of parameters and assigns weights thereto. The total of such differentially weighted scores is used to rank all institutions covered by the survey. Institutions ranked high use this information for attracting students of better caliber, while aspiring students and their families use it to decide which institution to opt for.

The typical parameters used to rate and rank business schools include factors such as (a) scale of operations, (b) governance, (c) infrastructure, (d) industry interface, (e) intellectual capital, (f) criteria for admission, (g) placement record, (h) faculty profile, (i) accreditation and linkages, etc. In the rigmarole of these complicated marketing activities, neither the rating agencies nor the business schools bother to find out whether the students of these institutions have indeed learnt the art and/or science of management!

The administrators and faculty of institutes of management are likely to be provoked by the preceding observation. They are likely to counter the charge by using arguments such as (a) there is strictly enforced attendance requirement; (b) there are marks given for class participation; (c) the students are required to carry out projects assigned to them; (d) there is continuous evaluation, through quizzes as well as mid-term and final examination in each course; and so on. If all this does not indicate learning, they would argue, “look at our 100% placement record.”

All this may be true, at least in the better known institutions of management. But even where this is happening, it does not necessarily mean that real and deep learning has taken place among the students. It will not be inappropriate to quote Benjamin Franklin in this context: “Tell me and I forget; Teach me and I remember; Involve me and I learn.” True learning is not necessarily reflected in passing of examinations, which is largely a function of memory. And true learning is also not indicated by getting recruited by a company, which depends largely on the efficiency of the placement service provided by the institution and the health of the country’s economy. In any case, almost anyone who enters a business school and pays the required fees ends up passing the examinations, gets the coveted degree or diploma, and gets placed! It is doubtful to assume that all of them would have acquired true learning.

If all these are not good indicators of true and deep learning, what then is a better indicator of such learning? The answer is the presence of emotional, cognitive and behavioural engagement of students with the process of learning. The antithesis of engagement is said to be burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997), alienation (Mann, 2001), and inertia, apathy or...