

Quality of Academic Processes in Management Education: A Study of Alumni of Management Institutes in Kerala State

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Abstract

Management education in India gained demand with the opening of the economy and many institutions have come up since then to offer post graduate courses like Master of Business Administration (MBA) and Post Graduate Diploma in Management (PGDM).

Quality of higher education has been a matter of great concern not only in India but also in UK, Australia and other European countries as well. The study attempted to assess the impact of the various dimensions of academic processes in terms of the perceived benefits captured through a survey of Alumni from Kerala based management institutes.

In order to establish the quality of higher education in United Kingdom, the Quality Accreditation Agency (QAA) have developed a Framework for Higher Education Qualification (FHEQ) which stipulates accreditation based on assessments using certain subject benchmark statements for different levels of educational qualifications. The FHEQ framework, adapted for the Indian conditions has been made the reference point for this study to assess the quality of Management Education based on the academic processes adopted.

The Quality Code for Higher Education in UK describes Academic quality as being concerned with how well the learning opportunities are made available to students to enable them to achieve their qualification award. It is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning resources are provided for them. In order to achieve a higher education award, students participate in the learning opportunities made available to them by their higher education provider.

Threshold academic standards are the minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic award. The qualification descriptors in the survey exemplify the outcomes and attributes expected of learning that results in the award of higher education qualifications. These outcomes represent the integration of various learning experiences resulting from designated and coherent programs of study.

Key words: Qualification Descriptor, Employability skills, Framework for Higher Education (FHEQ), Quality code, Accreditation, Quality Accreditation Agency(QAA), European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS).

Introduction

Management education in India gained demand with the opening of the economy in 1991. Many institutes/colleges have come up since then to offer post graduate courses in Management like Master of Business Administration (MBA) and Post Graduate Diploma in Management (PGDM).

Presently, apart from 13 IIM's, there are about 3500 B-Schools in the country offering different management courses to over 5,00,000 students.

There are 86 full time management institutes in Kerala with student admission capacity of over 8000 annually. Of these 77 colleges, which offer MBA course, are affiliated to one of the four universities viz Kerala, Mahatma Gandhi, Calicut and Kannur Universities approved by UGC. Nine other autonomous institutes offer PGDM programme, which is approved by the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), New Delhi.

Whereas the MBA course follow the guidelines of the respective affiliated universities, the PGDM programme have the flexibility to decide their own curriculum and course content in tune with industry requirements and their strategic goals.

In addition to regular full time courses, there are a few part time as well as online distance education courses by various Institutes/ Universities that students in Kerala can avail. However, the scope of this research has been restricted to only regular full time courses approved by either the Universities or the AICTE.

The quality of management education in India

The higher educational institutions bill (Entry and Operations) passed by the parliament in May 2010, was an attempt to reform the higher education sector, but it lapsed last year (2014). Currently HRD Ministry is planning to reintroduce the bill with some modifications with a view to provide easier access for foreign universities to set up and award degrees in India. Already University of Chicago, Harvard Business School and Deakin University have opened research centers in India.

Accreditation has been highlighted as one of the key indicator of quality in management education. While Indian Institute of Management-Kozhikode has obtained international accreditation from the Association of MBA's (AMBA), SCMS school of Business has accreditation from the ACBSP (Accreditation Council for Business School Programmes in USA) as well as Association of Business Schools (United Kingdom). Six of the MBA colleges in Kerala have obtained accreditation from National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC).

Global quality standards for management education

Quality of higher education has been a matter of great concern not only in India but in UK, Australia and other European countries as well. In order to establish the quality of higher education, the Quality Accreditation Agency (QAA) in United Kingdom have developed a Framework for Higher Education Qualification (FHEQ) which stipulates accreditation based on evaluation using certain subject bench mark statements for different levels of education. It was thought appropriate that the FHEQ framework, adapted for the Indian conditions, be the reference point for this study on quality of Management Education.

QAA act as the reference point to assure and enhance academic quality as well as set, maintain and deliver the academic standards for awarding the Degree. QAA have also established a Quality Code (QC) with a view to safeguard the academic standards of UK higher education, assure the quality of the learning opportunities to students, promote continuous and systematic improvements and ensure that information about higher education is publicly available.

On the similar lines, Brussels-based European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) also acts as a catalyst to enhance excellence in Management education and Development globally. The EFMD guidelines are intended to assist business schools, inform participants and employers, and contribute to the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS).

According to **EQUIS**, the purpose of an MBA degree is to educate individuals as managers and business specialists, and thus to improve the quality of management” (source: www.emfd.org). MBA is a postgraduate degree at the Master’s level and must correspond to minimum intellectual and academic standards. Admission to an MBA programme will normally require a first level degree or equivalent. MBA is considered as a broadening programme and therefore a specialised Master’s degree is not called an MBA.

FHEQ, has many similarities with EQUIS, and clearly spells out what institutions are required to do, what they can expect of each other, and what the general public can expect of higher education providers. These expectations express key matters of principle that the higher education community have identified as important for the assurance of quality and academic standards. Under this system, higher education providers have to ensure that the assessment of students is robust, valid and reliable and that the award of qualifications and credit are based on the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

The MBA curriculum provides a broad coverage of the main functional areas in management, namely accounting, finance, marketing and sales, operations management, information systems management, law and human resource management. It is expected to provide basic instruction in economics and quantitative analysis as well. The latter part of the programme makes provision for electives and may include the possibility for participants to choose a major area of study.

The Curriculum will normally be highly integrative and will include courses in business policy and strategy. Beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge and technical skills, the curriculum is expected to put theory into practice by focusing on the personal development of participants through inculcating such competencies as decision-making, team work, leadership skills, entrepreneurial potential, negotiation skills, communication and presentation skills.

Objectives of the study

The study was carried out with a view:

- 1) To identify the underlying dimensions of the academic quality in management education through secondary research and
- 2) To assess the impact of various academic processes on the perceived quality in terms of the benefits perceived by the Alumni of the Management institutes in Kerala

The Scope of the study

Business schools are expected to provide qualified business graduates to the industry and their impact could be assessed by evaluating the inputs, academic processes and the outcomes of the programme. The inputs to the programme come from the infrastructure, facilities like management leadership and support services, academic processes adopted as well as the externalities provided/stipulated by the degree awarding body/university concerned. The outcome can be measured in terms of the employability skills, knowledge, abilities and qualities developed in the graduates.

This study was limited to assessing the perceived benefits from the academic process quality of the regular B-school programmes based on a reflective survey of Alumni from the management institutes within the state of Kerala.

Framework applied for the study

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education had described academic quality as follows: 'Academic quality is concerned with how well the learning opportunities are made available to students to enable them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning resources are provided for them. In order to achieve a higher education award, students have to participate in the learning opportunities made available to them by their higher education provider. A provider should be capable of guaranteeing the quality of the opportunities it provides, but it cannot guarantee how any particular student will experience those opportunities. By ensuring that its policies, structures and processes for the management of learning opportunities are implemented effectively, a higher education provider also ensures the effectiveness of its outcomes'.

'Enhancement' is the process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. Quality enhancement naturally form part of effective quality assurance. This definition means that enhancement is more than a collection of examples of good practice that might be found across a provider. This can take place in different ways and at different levels, but a higher education provider has to be aware that it has a responsibility to improve the quality of learning opportunities and set policies, structures and processes in place to detect where improvement is necessary. Willingness to consider enhancement has to be embedded throughout the higher education provision and should stem from a high-level awareness of the need to consider improvement.

The quality code structure reflect the desire of the institutions to see a clearer distinction between those aspects which relate to academic standards and those relating to assuring and enhancing quality as well as providing information to stake holders.

Threshold academic standards are the minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic award. For equivalent awards, the threshold level of achievement has to be the same across the institutions. Individual awarding bodies are responsible for setting the grades, marks or classification that differentiate between levels of student achievement above the threshold academic standard within an individual award.

The qualification descriptors contained in the FHEQ exemplify the outcomes and attributes expected of learning that results in the award of higher education qualifications. These outcomes represent the integration of various learning experiences resulting from designated and coherent programs of study. These qualifications, which develop graduates with high level analytical skills and a broad range of competences, are therefore distinct from training or solely the acquisition of higher level skills.

The Quality Code provides a brief introduction to the role of various forms of externality in the assurance of standards and also sets out the expectation about externality, which higher education institutions are required to meet.

External input into institutions' quality management may arise through a number of processes, and from a variety of sources like external examiners as well as external inputs into programme design and approval, assessment, student support viz the development of careers, education, information, advice and guidance, and support for disabled students, programme monitoring, review and collaborative activity as well as external involvement in postgraduate research programmes.

The qualification descriptors are in two parts. The first is a statement of outcomes, achievement of which is assessed, which a student should be able to demonstrate for the award of the qualification. This part will be of particular relevance to higher education providers in designing, approving and reviewing academic programs. They will need to be satisfied that, for any program, the curriculum and assessments provide all students with the opportunity to demonstrate achievement of the intended outcomes.

Master's degrees/Equivalent diplomas are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study or area of professional practice
- comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship
- originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline
- conceptual understanding that enable the student to critically evaluate:
 - current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline
 - methodologies and propose new hypotheses, where necessary

The second part is a statement of the wider abilities and qualities that the typical student would be expected to have developed. It will be of assistance to the higher education providers during discussions with employers and others with an interest in the general capabilities of holders of the qualification.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgments in the absence of complete data
- communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences
- demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems
- act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level
- Continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level.

The Master degree holders will have the qualities and transferable skills necessary for:

- employment requiring the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility
- decision-making in complex and unpredictable situations
- independent learning ability required for continuing professional development

Research Methodology

This study was carried through a two stage process. In the first stage, a qualitative research study was undertaken with a view to make an investigation of the field of higher education, with special reference to the management education, both in the Indian and global context. This was carried out through a review of the literature on the status of higher education, drawing in the views of experts directly as well as through their publications, analysing the institutional infrastructure, systems, processes and procedures as well as devising a measurement scale for evaluating the quality of higher education.

The exploratory study was useful in developing the primary research instrument (questionnaire) and to evolve further research themes.

In the second stage, a descriptive research was carried out to make an assessment of the quality of academic processes in management education using a survey method using the structured questionnaire for the alumni including bench mark quality statements (Figure 1- given below).

Figure 1

The list of qualification descriptors/bench mark statements evaluated by Alumni on the various dimensions of the academic processes	
The higher education provider have/were :	Dimension Code
1) Maintained proper processes and outcomes of programme design and development	prg1
2) Overseen and monitored the processes and outcomes of the course to make corrective action	prg2
3) Made clear to students the criteria against which modules/ courses are assessed	prg3
4) Communicated processes, roles and responsibilities of all responsible for programme implementation	prg4
5) Made use of reference points and outside expertise for programme design and development	prg5
6) Involved students in programme design and development processes	prg6
7) Enabled faculty and staff to contribute effectively to programme design and development	prg7
8) Maintained physical, virtual and social learning environments that are safe accessible and reliable for every student promoting dignity, courtesy and respect in their use.	prg8
9) Benchmarked the academic standards and the achievements of the students with that of other reputed institutes	prg9
10) Guided the strategic priorities of the institution in case of the student admission and selection policies	sp1
11) Conducted student selection and admission processes in a professional manner by competent persons.	sp2
12) Transparent entry requirements or selection process and presented no unnecessary barriers to prospective students	sp3
13) Handled appeals and complaints on selection process expeditiously and in a published time-scale	sp4
14) Provided resources and activities, for every student, with equal opportunity to achieve the intended learning outcomes	ltp1

15) Informed by reflection, evaluation of professional practice, and subject specific educational scholarship in case of learning and teaching practices.	ltp2
16) Measured student achievement rigorously and fairly through the process of assessment against the intended outcomes	ltp3
17) Ensured faculty and staff are appropriately qualified, up to date and supported	ltp4
18) Enabled every student to monitor their progress and further their academic development by providing regular opportunities to reflect on feedback and engage in dialogue with faculty and staff	se1
19) Put in place policies, practices and systems that facilitate successful transitions for academic, personal and professional progression.	se2
20) Made available appropriate learning resources and enable students to develop the skills to use them	se3
21) Recognized and disseminated jointly the enhancements made by student efforts by students and faculty	se4
22) Provided effective representation for the collective student voice to be heard	aa1
23) Made available opportunities for student to raise matters of concern without any risk of disadvantage.	aa2
24) Adopted procedures which encourage constructive engagement with the appeals and complaint process for early and informal resolution.	aa3
25) Conducted academic appeals and complaints procedures in a timely and fair manner.	aa4
26) Ensured that appropriate action is taken following an appeal or complaint.	aa5
27) Provided timely feedback to students on assessment in a secure, constructive and developmental manner	ic1
28) Shared with students the informative reports received from external examiners on good practice, innovation and opportunity to enhance learning	ic2
29) Described to all stakeholders the mission, values and strategy of the institute.	ic3
30) Assisted prospective students to select their programme with an understanding of the academic environment and the support that is available to them.	ic4

The Sampling Design

The sampling universe consisted of all the graduates who have successfully completed the programme from any of the management institutes, established in Kerala. The sampling frame consisted of the alumni of the institutes, which have a standing of at least 5 years in the state -which means that at least three batches of students would have passed out from the institute. The sample size arrived theoretically was 381, considering an Alumni population of 32000 (i.e. 6400 seats* 5 batches) at a confidence level of 95% with 5% margin of error, against which 385 valid samples were analysed. Random sampling was resorted to for selecting the respondents.

Analysis and findings of the study

The primary research study was to capture the quality of academic processes in management education through a perceptual study of the Alumni of the management institutes. Data was collected through a validated questionnaire which measures the perception of the variables under study. The generated response sheet was scrutinized to eliminate all possible errors using Microsoft Excel. The responses were analyzed using frequency test for detecting missing values. Standardized scores of the responses were taken to identify outliers and any values with a z-score outside ± 4 was considered as an outlier and eliminated. As many statistical methods require the normal distribution of the data, normality was checked using skewness and kurtosis for every variable separately. The final data set containing 385 responses were used to test the proposed hypothesis using appropriate statistical tools in SPSS and Structural Equation Modeling.

The hypotheses were tested using Exploratory Factor Analysis, Confirmatory Factor Analysis, One-Way Anova and T-Test. The sample was checked for the various assumptions required by the hypotheses testing methods. Durbin-Watson statistic was used to test for independence of observations; Runs test was used to examine the randomness of sample and Levene's test was used to confirm the equal variances of groups used for One-Way Anova and T-Test. For testing sample adequacy, KMO test was used. Bartlett's test of sphericity was used to reject the existence of an identity matrix in terms of inter-correlation between the items tested. The reliability of the reflective construct was checked using Cronbach's Alpha (α) and the formative construct was checked for absence of multi-collinearity using Variance Inflation Factor. The validity was tested based on the literature review and theoretical foundation of the research.

Descriptive statistics of the respondents showed that 60.3% of the responses were from male students and rest from the female students. Based on the universities, 48.8% of the responses were from students doing their management studies from MG University, 22.9% from Calicut University, 6.2% from Kerala University and the rest 22.1% from the Deemed University. Thus it can be concluded that 79.9% of the respondents have undergone MBA course and 22.1% did their PGDM programme.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) for Academic Process

The analysis started with an exploratory factor analysis to identify the dimension structure of the antecedent variable, the 'academic process' construct, containing 36 scale items which were reduced to 30 items after checking content and face validity through expert opinions.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.860 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($p < 0.001$) with a chi square value of 0.64 with 435 degrees of freedom confirming the goodness of data for further analysis.

EFA was conducted to verify whether the initial conceptualization of eight factor structure of academic processes is perceived in a similar manner by the respondents. The exploratory maximum likelihood factor analysis identified 6 components with Eigen value greater than 1, which together explained variance of 64.71 percent (refer Figure 2)

Sl. No.	Name of Component	Initial Eigen Values			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
		Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	Programme Design	7.653	25.512	25.512	7.653	25.512	25.512	5.151	17.169	17.169
2	Learning and Teaching	3.535	11.783	37.295	3.535	11.783	37.295	3.065	10.215	27.384
3	Academic appeals	2.849	9.496	46.792	2.349	9.490	46.792	3.035	10.115	37.500
4	Recruitment and selection	2.411	8.035	54.827	2.411	8.035	54.827	2.825	9.415	46.915
5	Student Engagement	1.720	5.734	60.551	1.720	5.734	60.561	2.721	9.069	55.985
6	Information & Communication	1.245	4.153	64.714	1.245	4.153	64.714	2.619	8.730	64.714

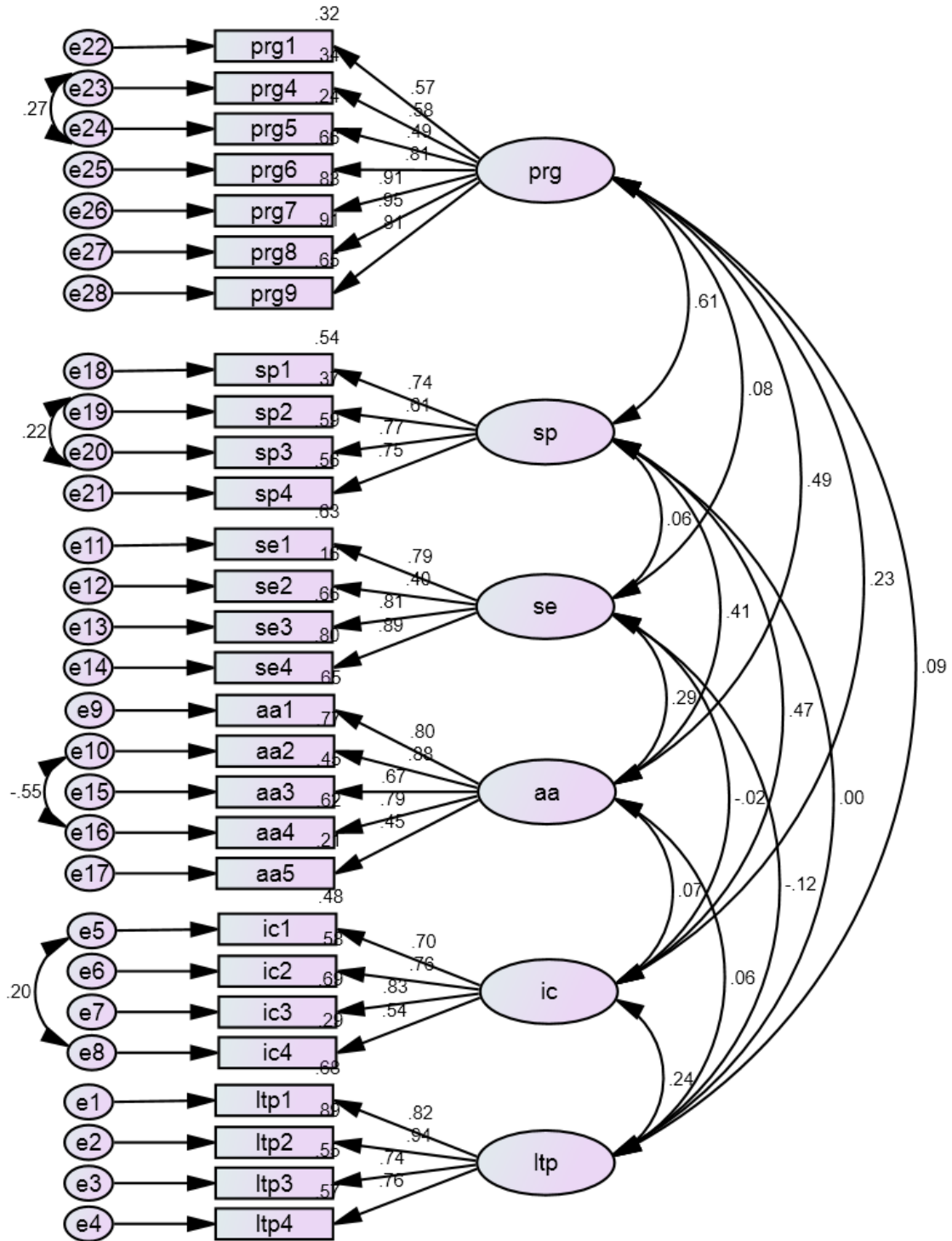
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis (Source: Research data)

Figure 2: Total Variance Explained

The factor structure developed from EFA has got adequate loading for each factor with minimum chance for cross loading. The 30 items could be classified into 6 factors in alignment with the pre conceptualized pattern. The six factors are programme design (prg) with 9 items, Student selection process (sp) with 4 items, Student engagement (se) with 4 items, Academic appeal (aa) with 5 items, Information clarity (ic) with 4 items and Learning and teaching (ltp) potential with 4 items (as per details given below).

CFA for Academic Process:

Once the EFA was done to reveal a factor structure, it was confirmed using a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to determine the ability of predefined model to fit an observed set of data. The CFA involved a two stage procedure where in the first programme design dimension was validated to a better fitting model with recommended indices by eliminating two items ‘prg2’ and ‘prg3’ which showed a high level of cross loading. The measurement models for the rest 5 dimensions were showing a good fitting model with recommended indices in the first estimates itself. The structural model showed that there exist statistically significant relationships among the academic process and its extracted dimensions with a good fit model with all recommended indices.



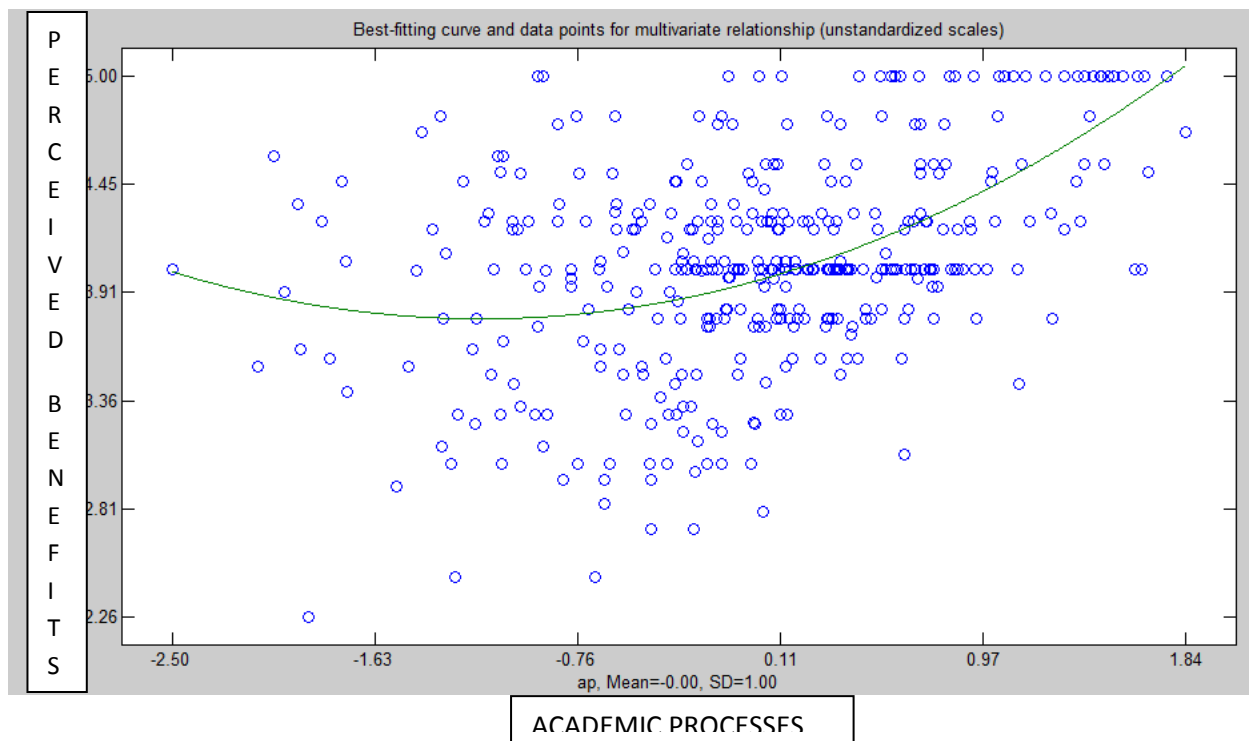
Measurement Model for "Academic Process" Construct
 CMIN/DF = 1.907, CFI = 0.947, GFI = 0.898, SRMR = 0.0461
 RMSEA = 0.049, PCLOSE = 0.649, HOELTER = 228

Major Findings of the study

- There exist a significant relationship between academic process and perceived benefits and better academic process leads to better perceived benefits (refer graph of scatter diagram in Figure 3 given below)
- The exploratory factor analysis revealed six components with Eigen value greater than 1 which together explained the variance of over 64.7 percent of the academic process quality.
- The dimensions that explained the academic process quality were Programme Design and Development (25.5%), Learning & Teaching process (11.7%), handling of Academic Appeals (9.5%), Recruitment & Selection process (8%), Student Engagement process (5.7%) and Information & Communication process (4.1%).

Figure 3

Relationship between Academic process and Perceived benefits



Conclusion and implications of the study

The study brought out the impact of the various dimensions of academic processes on the academic quality in terms of the benefits perceived by the Alumni and also established the inter relationships between the various dimensions of academic process in improving the quality of management education. The scope of this study has been limited to measuring the impact of academic processes in the quality of management education in the context of Kerala state. This paper forms a part of the Ph D thesis work done under Bharathiar University by the authors. Other aspects and conclusions of study on quality enhancement, carried out for the doctoral research, is outside the scope of this paper. Researchers and students on higher education quality would be in a position to build on this research for knowledge creation and to develop further extension themes.

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