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## CHOICE OF ELECTIVE COURSE AMONG MANAGEMENT STUDENTS IN INDIA

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### *Abstract*

*The present study uses conjoint analysis, to examine management students' preference for choosing their elective course. Result suggests that choice of an elective course is largely a function of various criteria and priority. Two hundred second year management students, from different categories of B-schools, were asked to choose from a series of hypothetical choice tasks. The choice reflected participants' preference for an elective course from a list of courses, based on certain criteria. Data analysis revealed that criteria like course worth, pedagogy and instructor's background, emerged as the most important factor influencing students' preference for an elective course.*

**Keywords :** Professional Student Preference, Management Education, Decision Making, Elective Choice.

**JEL :** M19

### **1. Introduction**

Management Education has become more accessible while its quality has taken a severe beating. Corporate leaders, business school professors and alumni are of the opinion that the management education course content has not been a reflection of business realities. Today a major problem of any Indian B-school is dearth of quality faculty. Churchill was of the view that resistance to learning is not about the outcome of learning but about the process itself. Scholars of management education are of the opinion that there is an urgent need for a shift from "instruction-based paradigm" to "learning-based paradigm" (Barr and Tagg,

1995) that provides an environment for students to learn through active participation.

Indian business schools are facing radical change in the last 20 years. **Brooks and Rudd (2005)** raised a question, 'do course curriculum live up to the demands of students and corporate world?'. **Kaimal (2003)** and **Drea et al (2005)** were of the opinion that today's generation, that has grown up in an interactive technological environment, are bored more quickly with lecture and power point presentations. The current generation has been raised in an economically prosperous era, with a set of expectations, totally different from that of their previous generations. **Van Dam (2006)**

states that Generation Y expects to get entertained in the learning process. This generation has a tendency to question authority and not respond to traditional styles of command and control (**Lescohier 2006**). Hence faculty of business schools (**Albers-Miller, Straughan, and Prenshaw 2001**), need to adopt innovative teaching methods and course design in order to improve the learning experience. Despite the changes in preference across generations in the last decade, very little research study have been focused on understanding the perception of students of this generation. Research, conducted before 2000, may not be the true reflection of student perceptions as Generation Y has replaced Generation X.

## 2. Literature Review

Faculty members, who constantly monitoring students' attention, attitudes, class participation and satisfaction (**Lincoln 2008**). **Matulich, Papp, and Haytko (2008)**, emphasized the need for continuous innovations in curriculum design and delivery, for capturing students' attention and engagement in the class room. In an attempt to make courses interesting and popular, faculty members often resort to innovative pedagogy. **Desai, Damewood, and Jones (2001)** were of the opinion that a student-focused pedagogy improves teaching. Review of the literature distinguishes active teaching style that incorporates student classroom involvement from passive teaching styles that incorporate faculty centered discussions. Few researchers are of the opinion that students' feedback form should be multidimensional (**Marks 2000**) to capture the teaching effectiveness. The dimensions may include faculty background, perceived learning, course workload, course grading, course structure and course worth. **Lombardo and Tocci (1979)** investigated the effect of physical attractiveness and qualifications of the instructor on student ratings of performance.

**Freeman et al. (1992)** studied the role of gender on students' preference for a specific course. Previous research studies by **Tieman and Rankin-Ullock (1985)**, **Basow and Silberg (1987)**, **Kierstead et al. (1988)**, **Basow (1995)**, **Tatro (1995)** **Schuhmann and McGoldrick (1999)**, have tried to find out whether students' course evaluation and subsequent decision, are guided by the gender of the instructor. **Kaschak (1981)** surveyed first-year and seniors graduate students and found that gender exercised no influence on preference. Relationship between students' evaluation of instructors and course selection was analysed in 70s and 80s (**Martin 1989**). Other research studies focused on extraneous factors like the timing and day of evaluations (**Nichols and Soper 1972**), class size and status (**McKeachie 1997**), pedagogy (**Davis, Shekhar, and Van Auken 2002**), leniency in evaluation (**Bacon and Novotny 2002**), instructor sex and rank (**Freeman 1994**). **Marks (2000)** and **Ory and Ryan (2001)** and found commonality between the dimensions and their influence.

## 3. Statement of the Problem

Recent research on business students, has shown the impact of course design and teaching styles on students' performance (**Black and Wingfield 2006; Keltgen 2006; Laditka and Houck 2006; Smith 2005; Tucker et al. 2003; Wingfield and Black 2005**). There has been a thrust towards innovation in curriculum design in business schools (**Frontczak 1998**). Empirical evidence indicates business students' preference for innovative course designs (**Nulty and Bennett 1996**). Course design has a tremendous impact on achievement (**Young et al. 2003**) and on learning (**Prosser and Trigwell 2006**). Interactive learning helps in critical thinking (**Paul 1990**), experiential learning (**Kolb 1983**), and reflective judgment (**Allen and Young 1997**), which result in better retention (**Van**

Eynde and Spencer 1988) than traditional lecture method (Hunt and Madhavaram 2006; Li, Greenberg, and Nicholls 2007; Woodbridge 2006). Comadena et al. (2007) found nurturing and caring attitude of faculty, reflected in the course delivery, enhanced effectiveness. The decision process students engage in, for selecting their elective course, is highly complex and it is characterized by high involvement and perceived risk (Babad et al. (1999). Moogan et al. (1999) conducted a research study on decision-making stages. Decision regarding choice of elective by second year students in the management program was a highly involving decision, often affecting their future job prospects (Veloutsou et al. 2004). Maringe (2006) and Wignall (2007) stated that increasing fee structure and demanding corporate expectation, have forced students of current generation to expect more from the business education.

The present study makes an attempt to find out the criteria and the tradeoff students make, while selecting an elective course, in the second year of their management program.

#### 4. Objectives of the Study

Kushner (1999) pointed out that within the educational system, major decisions on resources, markets and processes, are affected by the academic rigour. Thus curriculum becomes the critical element for branding an institute. Course curriculum plays a significant role in acquiring and retaining students (Hancock, 2002) and in motivating and enhancing their performance (Hidi and Harackiewicz. 2000). Appropriate classroom environment plays a significant role for enhancing learning and academic performance (Stipek, 1996). The classroom environment is determined by course design (Maslovty and Kuzi, 2002), course content, course worth, evaluation etc. Previous research studies focused on the multidimensional nature of student evaluations of faculty (Delucchi 2000).

Though faculty is one of the significant ingredients in the success or failure of course execution, other factors do influence student preference for choosing a particular elective course. Students' choice in higher education has not been extensively studied (Foskett and Helmsley-Brown, 2001). There is a felt need for research on students' course evaluations and rating of faculty (Ory and Ryan 2001). Studies on student preferences for elective course are scarce though research on instructor evaluation has been widely discussed. Although education literature has drawn considerable attention towards curricula improvement, the question of course choice remains unexplored (Catterall et al. 2002; Davis, Misra and Van Auken 2002; Young and Murphy 2003).

#### 5. Research Question

The present study attempts to understand the criteria and the weightage given to various attributes, in arriving at a decision pertaining to the choice of an elective course by second-year business school students. Hence the present study addresses the following two research questions:

*Research Question 1:* The attributes and their importance in selecting an elective course.

*Research Question 2:* The trade-off students make while selecting an elective course.

#### 6. Methodology

Business curriculum should be more realistic and practical, with equal emphasis on soft skills. Research shows that students' performance and grades depend on their involvement (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001), the groups assigned to them (Shaw, 2004), the teacher behavior and expectations (Hwang et al., 2004), the peer evaluation components (Chen & Lou, 2004) and evaluation criteria used (Bartels et al., 2000). Students' evaluate the course, based on the course worth and teaching quality (Smith, 2008). Perceived teaching quality is a function of overall learning

experience, students' involvement and awareness regarding their performance (**Hwang et al., 2004; Wagner & Moeffett, 2000**). The overall learning experience is a function of various attributes like students' perception of the ability of faculty to hold their attention, the perceived degree of encouragement in discussions and sharing of ideas.

To understand how students make a traded off between various attributes while choosing an elective course, this study used the Conjoint Analysis. As a multivariate technique, Conjoint Analysis was used to determine the relative importance of each attribute in terms of utility and the importance of each level of the attributes that influenced the preference. Academics and practitioners, from behavioral (**Green and Srinivasan 1978**) and marketing studies, (**Green and Rao 1971**) have used this technique for understanding choice preferences (**Green and Krieger 2002; Orme 2002**). The attributes are the predictor variables and the overall evaluations of a product/service are treated as dependent variable. Respondents were asked to evaluate a hypothetical product (in this study, the elective courses) based on the overall utility. Conjoint Analysis estimated the relative importance of various attributes in the choice process, based on the relative utilities of the attribute (**Murphy et al. 2004**). In the second year management program, business school students are required to choose a set of elective courses of their choice. In choosing an elective course, students make tradeoff between various attributes. Choice of an elective course occupies a significant amount of importance as it determines job prospects of the student.

This study aims to provide an understanding of the process of tradeoffs, based on relative importance attached to various attributes. The findings of the study could provide a good framework to course instructors to design their courses that would appeal to the students' value proposition. **Table - 1** enlists numerous potential attributes, identified from

previous literature and focus group discussion. The attributes listed in **Table - 1** covered substantial portions of Student Evaluations of Educational Quality (SEEQ), used by **Marsh (1991)**. Each attribute has a different and unique influence and priority in the selection of an elective course (**Babad, Darley, and Kaplowitz 1999**).

Focus group discussion was organized among second-year business school students, to identify key attributes that influenced their choice of an elective course. Students were asked to provide feedback on the questionnaire, based on how easy it was to read and understand the instructions, the visual layout, the problems encountered while accessing and filing the web questionnaire. The attributes, included in the final study, were grading leniency, course workload, course worth, instructor background and pedagogy. Based on the pretest, the wordings of the questionnaire were modified and the attributes like sex and rank of professor were dropped, as they were not found to be of statistical significance. **Table - 2** highlights the five attributes, along with three levels (low, moderate, and high), used in the main study. The final questionnaire had five attributes, with three levels, for a balanced questionnaire, design (**Johnson 1996**).

Simultaneously, it was kept in mind that operationalizing attributes, along with the levels, should be communicable and actionable. A full-profile approach (five attributes with three levels) led to a total 243 combinations. By fractional factorial design, it was reduced to 15. A total of 15 alternatives, on a 5-point Likert Scale, were used in the final questionnaire, administered to the respondents.

### **6.1. Sample Selection and Data Collection**

The population considered for the present study was second year management students from various B schools in India. A convenient sampling technique was used. 200 responses

were obtained from second-year students. 100 students, each from category A and category B business schools, were identified from the attendance list of the second year students from various parts of the country. Identification of business schools under category A and B, was based on the ranking done by professional ranking agencies in 2013. Business schools, from both categories, differed in terms of size, location, admission requirements, faculty strength, publication, placement etc. The data were collected from June till August 2013.

## 7. Analysis and Discussion

The findings of the study revealed the trade off, used by students, in choosing an elective course. **Table - 3** reflects the salient attributes and their levels, with the relative importance and utility worth, accorded by the students, for preferring an elective course. The most preferred elective course registered the greatest total utility, as displayed in **Table - 3**. Instructors' background appeared as the most important attribute, influencing the selection of an elective course, among respondents from category A business schools. Career worth seemed to be the most important attribute, influencing the preference of an elective course, for respondents from category B business schools. **Table - 4** highlights Consumer Delivered Value (CDV) for various combinations of attributes (in the order of preference). The results revealed differences in choice criteria and priority among respondents, from different category of B-schools, influencing the choice of an elective course.

### 7.1. Category A Business Schools

First preference was for the elective course that had the following criteria- elective course offered by the instructor, with industry and academic background, with pedagogy having a good mix of theory with real life examples, moderate course workload and moderate grading component.

Second preference was for the elective course that had the following criteria- elective course with greater career prospects, offered by an instructor with industry and academic background, with pedagogy having proper blend of theory with practical examples, with minimum course workload and liberal grading component.

Third preference was for the elective course that had the following criteria- elective course that provided scope for greater career prospects, offered by an instructor having industry background, with pedagogy having industry illustration and less theory even if the course had heavy course workload and tough grading component.

### 7.2. Category B Business Schools

First preference was for the elective course that had the following criteria- elective course with higher career prospects, offered by an instructor with industry background, with pedagogy based on real life examples and less course workload, with liberal grading component.

Second preference was for those elective courses that had the following criteria- elective course having scope for greater career prospects, offered by an instructor with industry background, with minimum workload and moderate grading component.

Third preference was for those elective courses that had the following criteria- elective course that provided scope for career prospects, offered by an instructor with industry and academic background, with pedagogy having a mix of both theory and practice, with moderate course workload and moderate grading component.

While evaluating the goodness of fit of the estimated Conjoint Model, the value of Pearson's R was 0.992 (for category A business schools) and 0.991 (for category B business schools). The value of adjusted R square was

0.942 (for category A business schools) and 0.934 (for category B business schools). Both the values were reasonably high at 5 percent level of significance [asymptotic significance = 0.0039 (for category A business schools) and asymptotic significance = 0.0050 (for category B business schools)]. A higher Pearson's R-value and adjusted R Square value and the result of regression analysis, confirmed the high predictive accuracy and internal validity of the Conjoint Model. The results can be inferred from **Tables 5, 6 and 7**.

### 8. Findings and Suggestion

Result of the study revealed criteria like greater career worth and valuable learning experience, influenced the choice of an elective course. It was the faculty who made the elective course relevant and useful by the course pedagogical and teaching effectiveness (**Bacon and Novotny 2002**). Business school students were of the opinion that the faculties, who emphasized theory over real life situations, provided relatively less valuable knowledge. Students positively related course worth of an elective that provided them an advantage during placement. Students preferred faculty, having extensive industry brought experiences, bring value - added learning and hands-on experience to the class. Clearly, it is seen from the findings that students were not interested in an elective course if it had no career prospects and hence no educational value.

Faculty should design their course innovatively, to make their courses worthy of choice by students. It is worth exploring different types of pedagogy like case study, exercise, role play, simulation, videos etc. Inputs from peers and practitioners may provide valuable insight to faculty for designing their course. Faculty, with pure academic background, should be encouraged to update themselves by collaborating with practitioners, taking up consulting and application-oriented research work. Faculty should be encouraged to invite

frequently guest speakers in their session from related industries. Students perceived a positive relationship between the assignment and learning outcomes, if it was relevant and useful in their career goals. According to **Bennis and O'Toole (2005)**, management education curriculum must integrate theory and practices to be relevant to the corporate world. Faculty should make the assignments more interesting, by being transparent in assigning grades and giving rich and constructive feedback on the projects assigned. Faculty should give assignments that are challenging and relevant and yet achievable as this would make students to have a feeling of accomplishment. Findings from several studies (**Simons et al. 2004**) indicate that tasks that are perceived to be relevant to the goals are more engaging. Pedagogy design should make students realize that the skills acquired are worthwhile and have utility for their jobs prospect (**O'Neil and Hopkins, 2002**).

### 9. Conclusion

The results of this study would provide useful insight into the course curriculum design. Developing management students as effective leaders, calls for reengineering the curricula as management education has been blamed for losing its relevance to the corporate world (**Bennis and O'Toole, 2005, Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002**). Business school professors should be encouraged and rewarded to spend more time in refining or exploring new pedagogies for the delivery of their courses. Young instructors should be encouraged to undergo classroom training for learning skills and techniques under the supervision of an experienced instructor. Mechanism should be set to facilitate instructors, offering similar courses, to work as a team to improve their teaching methods through discussions and sharing of expertise knowledge. Faculty should be given more incentives to incorporate pedagogical innovations that make the classroom more engaging, with focus on participative learning (**Mintzberg 2004**). **Bennis and O'Toole**

(2005) stated that integrating theory, concepts and business practices can make management education relevant to the business world.

Several studies (Pintrich and De Groot, 1990; Reeve, Jang, Hardre, and Omura, 2002, Simons, DeWitte, and Lens, 2004) have indicated that learning that is perceived to be important, interesting, and relevant to the students' goals, would be more appreciated. Therefore, the pedagogy, the activities and assignments in a curriculum, should be engaging to hold the interests of the student (Chung and McLarney, 2000; Stipek 1996). Any method used to impart learning, be it lecture, case analysis, simulation, or other activities, should be able to make students realize the utility and learning value of the methodology (O'Neil and Hopkins, 2002). It has been found (Schwartz 2004a 2004b) that students sometimes lack necessary experience to make correct choice of an elective course that would be befitting for their future career. This may be due to inadequate information and guidance, leading to poor choice and poor sequencing of elective courses. Students definitely would not wish to make mistakes or end up taking unnecessary elective courses. Hence this calls for the need for career counseling, to provide students direction and guidance, in choosing the appropriate elective courses relevant for their career prospect.

## 10. Limitations of the Study

This study is not without limitations. It would be inappropriate to generalize the findings since the present study used only the student perspective. While students do have a huge role in making choice of elective course, incorporating a broader sample and opinion of different stake holders, would be more appropriate.

## 11. Scope for Further Research

The present study identified the relative importance of attributes and trade off, used by

students, for choosing an elective course. However, very little is known about how students form perceptions on various attributes. Future research can be carried to understand their decision process and what decision rules are employed while choosing an elective course. Another area for future inquiry could be to explore the decision-making and post decision regret, among students, on their choice decision.

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**Table - 1 : List of Attributes**

<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Source</b>
Course Pedagogy/ Pedagogical Style	Course material having a variety of delivery techniques to reach the students effectively in their classes	Clarke, Flaberty, and Mottner 2001, Cohen 1991, Leeds, Stull, and Westbrook 1998, Marsh and Dunkin 1985, Marks 2000, Drago, Peltier and Sorensen 2002, Davis, Shekhar, and Van Auken 2002.
Career Worth/ Relevance	Courses that are closely aligned to prepare the students for their career, which are perceived as “hot topics”, tailored to individual interests, has “real-world” orientation, focusing on real-world examples and applications	Faranda and Clarke 2004, Karns 1993, Newell, Titus, and West 1996, Stafford 1994, Gregorian 2004, Bacon and Novotny 2002, Kelley, Conant, and Smart 1991, Babad, Darley, and Kaplowitz 1999, Feldman 1989, Marsh and Bailey 1993.
Instructor/ Experience of instructor	Perceived usefulness or relevance of the knowledge gained in a course from a particular instructor	Abrami 1989, Cashin and Downey 1992, Delucchi 2000, Gremler and McCollugh 2002, Marks 2000: Marsh 1987, Marsh and Dunkin 1985, Clayson 1999, Marsh and Hocesvar 1991, Pohlmann 1975.
Grading Leniency	Correlation of higher grades with the faculty popularity	Bilimoria 1995, Webster 1990, Clayson and Haley 1990, Engdahl, Keating and Perrachione 1993, Feldman 1989, Marsh and Roche 1997, Bacon and Novotny 2002, Greenwald and Gillmore 1997, McKeachie 1997.
Course workload/ Difficulty	No and quality of assignments	Bacon and Novotny 2002, d’Apollonia and Abrami 1997, Greenwald and Gillmore 1997, Marks 2000, Marsh and Roche 1997.

Source: Author based on literature review

**Table - 2 : Investigated Attribute and their Levels**

<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Level of Attribute</b>	<b>Description – Attribute &amp; Level of Attribute</b>
<b>Grading</b>	1	Easy
	2	Very Tough
	3	Moderate
<b>Course Work Load</b>	1	Light
	2	Heavy
	3	Moderate
<b>Course Pedagogy</b>	1	Theory and Cases
	2	Theory and Practice
	3	Industry applied real life examples
<b>Instructor Background</b>	1	Academics
	2	Industry
	3	Academics and Industry
<b>Career Prospects</b>	1	Low
	2	High
	3	Medium

Source: Statistical Analysis by Author using SPSS 18

**Table - 3 : Relative Importance of Attributes**

<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Category A</b>	<b>Category B</b>
	<b>Utility Worth (%)</b>	<b>Utility Worth (%)</b>
<b>Grading</b>	12.25	9.92
<b>Course Workload</b>	11.68	9.16
<b>Course Pedagogy</b>	6.56	7.63
<b>Instructor Background</b>	16.58	18.32
<b>Career Prospects</b>	52.93	54.96

Source: Statistical Analysis by Author using SPSS 18

**Table - 4 : Consumer Delivered Value**

Category	Grade	Course Work load	Course Pedagogy	Instructor Background	Career Prospect	CDV
A	Moderate	Moderate	Theory and Cases	Industry & Academics	High	2.805661578
A	Easy	Light	Industry applied real life examples	Industry & Academics	High	2.606234097
A	Very tough	Heavy	Industry applied real life examples	Industry	High	2.515585242
B	Easy	Light	Industry applied real life examples	Industry	High	2.627251886
B	Moderate	Light	Theory and Practice	Industry	High	2.487300914

Source: Statistical Analysis by Author using SPSS 18

**Table - 5 : Regressions Analysis**

	Category A	Category B
Multiple R	0.99170912	0.990580638
R Square	0.983486978	0.98125
Adjusted R Square	0.942204422	0.934375
Standard Error	1.075133272	1.145643924
Observations	15	15

Source: Statistical Analysis by Author using SPSS 18

**Table - 6 : ANOVA Category A**

	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	10	275.3763538	27.53763538	23.82330666	0.003913404**
Residual	4	4.623646209	1.155911552		
Total	14	280			

Source: Statistical Analysis by Author using SPSS 18

**Table - 7 : ANOVA Category B**

	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	10	274.75	27.475	20.93333333	0.005015272**
Residual	4	5.25	1.3125		
Total	14	280			

Source: Statistical Analysis by Author using SPSS 18