

**An exploratory study on Executive Management Education through Technology Mediated
Distance Learning in India**

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Abstract

Online education is becoming a major mode of learning especially for working executives. An assessment of this learning mode is important to evaluate the quality of learning and may provide useful directions to effective management of online learning. While abundant research exists on web based management education in the Western context, the reasons for undertaking web based executive management education programs, the contributors to learning effectiveness of such a program, the individual and organizational expectations for undertaking or supporting such a program are still not well understood in the Indian context. Though there is a wide spread emerging interest on online education in India, studies on online learning in India is scarce. We adopt a qualitative research methodology to explore the above issues.

Key words: Online education, India, Distance Learning, Management Education and Development

The use of internet to deliver executive management education has increased dramatically with literally thousands of courses being offered by educational institutes. Executive education programmes are undergoing a gradual shift, whereby they are no longer looked as simply a reward for high performing executives or an opportunity to get new knowledge; they are increasingly harnessed as opportunities to recast the worldviews of executive teams and to align organizations to new directions (Conger and Xin, 2000). Increased demands on employees to self-manage careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Arnold, 1997; Sullivan, Carden & David, 1998) have brought about a new demographic profile of employees to the classrooms who are eager to update their knowledge and skills while pursuing their jobs. At the same time, advances in Information technology have allowed colleges and universities to offer Satellite or Internet based courses as a way to meet the ever-increasing demand for higher and continuing education. With only about 150,000 places available at the 2000 business schools in India, the options for Indian executives are to either go abroad or enroll in an online management education program (<http://globalmbareport.com/index.php/online-mba-india/>). Executive online education is becoming one of the major markets for education in India. According to one estimate, the online education market in India generated about \$200 million in revenues in 2008, and is expected to touch \$1 billion by the end of the decade (Lakshman, 2008).

While the initial stages of research in this area focused on the technological dimensions of online education systems including course management and virtual learning environments, technology itself may not be an impediment anymore (Arbaugh et al,

2010). The research focus of online education systems has turned to the human dimension of the systems. Students' satisfaction with the course and perceived learning outcomes have been included as a dependent variable in various studies related to distance education, technology mediated learning and web-based courses (e.g. Marks et al, 2005; Eom et al, 2006; Alavi et al, 2007; Arbaugh & Rau, 2007). User satisfaction has also been found to be a significant predictor of learning outcomes (Eom et al, 2006). With larger number of articles published in this area, the theoretical and methodological rigour of studies of online learning in the management disciplines has increased dramatically over the last decade (Arbaugh, Desai, Rau & Sridhar, 2010).

TECHNOLOGY MEDIATED DISTANCE LEARNING

“Distance learning is defined as receiving education through web-based remote sources and can include both synchronous and asynchronous learning” (Hollenbeck, Zinkhan & French, 2005: 39). Technology mediated learning refers “to an environment in which the learner’s interactions with learning materials, peers, and/or instructors are mediated through advanced information technologies” (Alavi and Leidner, 2001: 2). In this paper, we have used the terms online education, online learning, technology mediated distance learning interchangeably to denote executive management education provided in an interactive distance learning mode. Hence technology mediated distance learning could include a combination of several remote methods of communication and education and could deploy video and audio technologies, email and other types of internet interaction.

Demand for Executive Management Education Programs in Asia generally and India in particular is set to grow enormously as the economies are liberalised and there is a need for indigenous professional managers. It is expected that the working age population in India is set to peak around 2020 when about 64% of the country's total population will belong to this group amounting to almost 830 million strong working age population (Ramchandran, 2006). However the quality of this group is much to be desired. While India's promised demographic dividend is widely proclaimed, it would fail to reap benefits if the workforce lacks knowledge, skills and creativity in handling jobs in a globalized and a diverse work environment. Most of the new jobs would be created in Service sectors such as IT & IT Enabled services, Retail, Health and Pharmaceuticals, Electronics and IT Hardware, Travel and Tourism. 80 percent of the jobs would require basic business communication, etiquette and strong inter-personal skills (<http://www.nsdcindia.org/>). While colleges churn out graduates by the millions, it is estimated that more than 17 percent of the graduates are not employable. Efforts have been made by the government to upgrade the skill levels, one such being the National Skills Development Corporation, incorporated through Public Private Partnership. Top tier Management Institutes have also tried to address this gap by having their own regular executive education programs. As a process of expansion, many have extended the executive management education over the web, as they cater to a more diverse audience than the traditional residential executive education program (Desanctis & Sheppard, 1999). Web based distance learning unfettered by many of the constraints facing traditional education has the potential to change the practices and image of management education. The flexibility of web based courses could also attract

competent students with wide variety of experiences who would otherwise not partake in graduate management education.

The motivations for pursuing such a programme for working executives could be quite diverse. Time tends to be a key constraint for students in online executive education programmes who have to typically balance work, family and studies. It could provide learning opportunities while continuing with work and offers flexibility to balance personal and professional life. Despite this flexibility, studies have indicated that online environments could be at par if not better than traditional education by supporting higher order learning by encouraging students to engage in a dialogue, think and reflect on their answers (Arbaugh, 2008; Ivancevich et al, 2009) signifying that this is a viable medium for course delivery. However the concerns of the students regarding distance learning encompass two underlying elements – one is personal time management and the second is about the faculty contact (Hollenbeck, Zinkhan & French, 2005). Because of the need to balance work, family and studies, the requirement of the Instructor to be flexible to the course demands are higher, while at the same time personal interaction becomes more difficult as contrasted to onsite education. Three levels of interaction viz., Instructor-student, student-student and student-content interactions have been identified as significant design parameters affecting perceived learning and satisfaction in previous research (Marks et al, 2005; Eom et al, 2006). While each of these is individually important Student Instructor interaction has significantly more influence on the perceived learning than student-student or student-content interaction (Marks et al, 2005)

Though research in online education has been primarily concentrated on the North American context, as management education becomes more globally dispersed, the generalisability of research findings to other regions of the world should receive increasing scrutiny (Arbaugh et al, 2010). As a number of institutes seek to offer management education over the internet and try to cater to a global audience, research based on different cultural contexts becomes increasingly relevant. Learning style preferences could vary on an individual's cultural values (Anupam, Hyokjin & Zinkhan 2002; Holtbrugge & Mohr, 2010). While students in low power distance contexts such as the US, would seek instructors who treat them as equals and as providers of tools for learning, in contrast, students from a high power distance society such as India could look up to the instructor for specific instructions and learning (Anupam, Hyokjin & Zinkhan 2002). This cultural influence on learning could have implications in the design and delivery of the programme. Further, Indians are socialized through strong family and extended family ties and they are more likely to develop stronger affiliative tendencies. This means that job related decisions are more influenced by interpersonal considerations than by task demands (Kanungo & Mendonca, 1994). In the context of executive education this could mean that the very reason of undertaking education while continuing with work could be influenced by the work group and organization. It was also observed in a programme offered by a leading management institute in India, there were a number of participants belonging to the same company and in some cases enrolled as cohorts where the company either fully or partially sponsored the cost of the education. We wanted to explore this link as well.

Hence we wanted to explore the following issues a) Motivation to do an Executive Management Education Programme, b) Reasons to do it over the web rather than face-to-face, c) Expectations after completing the programme, d) Contributors to learning effectiveness of the programme, e) Reasons for organizational support to online executive education programme.

While online learning is found to be an effective medium for the delivery of management education (Arbaugh et al, 2009), there appears to be variations across management disciplines in the student perceptions of learning outcomes and satisfaction (Arbaugh et al, 2010). While disciplines such as strategy, Organizational Behaviour, Human Resources appear to be more conducive to the medium, Operations Management appears to be less so. This study's sample includes students from multiple courses. This has the methodological benefits that it controls for instructor-specific characteristics that could affect outcomes in discipline specific research. Further we follow a qualitative approach through structured interviews to research this emerging area. There has been a disproportionate stress on studies on online education through quantitative research methods and these are attributed partially to the predominant research occurring in North American contexts (Arbaugh et al, 2001). Qualitative research would be helpful for identifying unique contextual characteristics and focusing on process level concerns.

METHODOLOGY

There were seventeen student respondents. All the students were course participants in a one year management certification programme provided through interactive synchronous distance learning mode by a leading institute of Management in India. The

institute offers its education programme in a blended learning format, where a major part of the course is delivered online which is supplemented by in-campus face-to-face interactions. The respondents ages ranged from 28 to 47, 16 were male and 1 respondent was female. 11 respondents had an engineering/technology background, 2 each were post-graduates in management and computer applications while 2 were graduates. They covered industries such as glass manufacturing, retail, IT Products and IT Services. They covered different functional areas such as engineering, Project Management, Sales, Quality and Human Resources. Their experience ranged from a minimum of 5 years to 25 years. All of them participated in an open-ended questionnaire interview. Structured interviews are well suited for accessing people's personal worlds and points of view and to understand people's experiences, attitudes and reactions all of which are difficult to capture through quantitative methodologies. Respondents were given the same set of open ended questions in a structured interview questionnaire format addressing the study's research questions. Participants were assured of confidentiality of all information provided. Following the procedure advocated by Krippendorf (2004) all applicable comments for each area covered by the research questions were selected and grouped into 'themes' that reflected the statement's underlying meaning. The data presented are an extract from the qualitative part of a larger study. We chose to do a qualitative study before conducting any quantitative examinations of learning effectiveness in online education in India, as there is no substantial body of research upon which to rely on.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Reasons for undertaking executive management education program

Interviewees made 15 statements in response to the question “What are the reasons for undertaking the executive management education program?” These 15 statements were categorized into 5 meta-themes. The most commonly mentioned reasons are to gain knowledge/skills (76% of the respondents), to better handle present or future roles (47% of respondents). These results are similar to the research by Thompson & Gui (2000) who have found that the overall motivations for pursuing executive MBA relate directly to learn more about management and how to analyze business situations. The reasons of better performance and career development (to increase legitimacy and brand value for better roles) also relates closely to Thompson and Gui’s work who found that career qualifications and becoming better at job are other important motivations to pursue executive management education. Surprisingly our results also find that there are a reasonable number of respondents (24%) who are motivated to pursue their management education because of the prestige associated with the Business School which was not found in earlier studies.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Reasons for taking it over the web rather than face-to-face

Interviewees made 36 statements for the question “What are your reasons for taking it over the web rather than a face-to-face fully residential program?” These 36 statements were categorized into five meta-themes. The most commonly cited reasons related to

not wanting to leave the current job for personal or professional reasons (88% of respondents). Flexibility offered by this mode has been referred to in previous studies as one of the important reasons for undertaking the web based education program (Hollenbeck et al, 2005). At the same time, respondents felt that there is no reduction in rigour or coverage due to the fact that this is done online (11%) and in fact some of them felt that this could be better as the learning could be practiced at work (17%). Some of the respondents also referred to the cost related implications of doing it online including opportunity cost, financial support for family and the competitive cost of the program compared to a full-time one.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Expected outcome after completion

Interviewees made 40 statements to the question "What are the likely outcomes after completing this program successfully?" These 40 statements were categorized into four meta-themes. The most commonly cited reasons refer to personal development/satisfaction (64% of the respondents), improved performance in present job and to gain higher responsibilities (35% of respondents each).

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Contributors to learning effectiveness

Interviewees made 44 statements to the question “Based on the experience you had, what are likely to contribute to learning effectiveness in such a program?” These 44 statements were categorized into eight meta-themes. The most important factors contributing to learning effectiveness relate to pedagogical factors (52% of respondents) and course design factors (47% of respondents). These results are quite distinct from research in the western contexts which have found that the interaction, primarily between the instructor-student has a pivotal influence on the learning effectiveness. Though these are cited, it is found that the percentage of occurrence in the sample for the interaction elements is fairly smaller.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Reasons for perceived organizational support for executive education program

Interviewees made 20 statements to the question “What are your perceptions on why your organization supported executive education program?” These 20 statements were categorized into three meta-themes. The most important reasons refer to the need to develop people and leadership in organizations (47% of respondents) and for motivation and retention of employees (29% of respondents). This also related to views in the Western context, where executive education is primarily used to close competency gaps in management (Büchel & Antunes, 2007). It’s also seen that quite a few respondents perceive the support for motivation & retention and even as a reward for performance.

[Insert Table 5 about here]

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

While abundant research exists on web based education in the Western context, the reasons for undertaking web based executive education programs, the contributors to learning effectiveness of such a program, the individual and organizational expectation for undertaking or supporting such a program are still not well understood in the Indian context. Our research probed into these factors and we found that there are some unique results in the Indian web based executive education context, especially on the contributors to learning effectiveness. A methodological limitation relates to the use of structured questionnaire responses. We used a structured questionnaire to which responses were sought. There was no further probe on the answers got. It is possible that there could have been greater clarity on some of the statements made if there was an interactive interview. Future research could possibly do a more detailed empirical research to explore these links further.

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Table 1: Reasons for undertaking executive management education program

S.No.	Themes	Percentage of occurrence in the sample (Number of statements)	Sample Statements
1	To gain knowledge/Skill	76 (13)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The primary reason I took this up was to get a better understanding on the managerial aspects, to be able to better relate to the different perspectives that one need to see an industry • I wanted to develop the overall Management tools/skills/concepts
2	To better handle present or future roles	47(9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematically & formally hone my soft & hard skills in anticipation (and expectations) of handling larger responsibilities in my company • New learning to enrich the job execution • Also to enhance my knowledge and position myself better in my current job and in future assignment.
3	To increase legitimacy and brand value for better roles	18(4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To get legitimacy in the eyes of the seniors for a larger role in the company management • ... to add a little more credibility to my resume ... As such, I made a decision to grow along the managerial line and this course will surely add more credibility to my intentions.
4	Personal satisfaction	11(2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most importantly, for my personal satisfaction and quenching my need for a formal skill up-gradation
5	Prestige associated with studying in a reputed Business School	24 (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When I came to know about this program, I knew this was one last chance destiny had given me to study management, from one of

			<p>the most prestigious schools, without disrupting my existing job</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Further, completing the course from a prestigious B-school had been my ambition and the programme (eMEP) helped me achieve both in one go
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Table 2: Reasons for taking it over the web rather than face-to-face

S.No.	Themes	Percentage of occurrence in the sample (Number of statements)	Sample Statements
1	Did not want to leave job for personal and work reasons	88 (15)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At this juncture of life there are lots of personal responsibilities which makes it impossible to leave the current job • Presently working with an automobile company. Wanted to continue learning without compromising the professional career
2	Learning could be more effective when doing job	17 (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could relate many learning with on-the-job happenings • will get chance to practice / Implement while at work, readily
3	As good as face-to-face in terms of rigour, discipline and coverage	11 (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As the course covers entire scope of face-to-face program, it was really value addition for us. • The selection criteria were exhaustive with a written exam and interview which meant peers were competitive.
4	Flexibility offered by the course	11 (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The web based course helps in attending the classes at one's own time which is a major constraint at an executive level
5	Finance related reasons (opportunity cost, money to support self & family, cost of the program)	17 (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over the years, as has my salary grown, so have my financial liabilities (home loan, annual insurance premium, pension plan commitments, child growth plan commitments etc). At this juncture, the only option in front of me was to pursue a course which would not necessitate my leaving the present job for a year or two, without compromising on the quality of learning.

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not want to leave my job because of financial liabilities
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Table 3: Expected outcome after completion

S.No.	Themes	Percentage of occurrence in the sample (Number of statements)	Sample Statements
1	Improved Performance in Present role	35 (9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I expect that I will be able to use knowledge of subjects like marketing, organization behavior, and quality management in my work. • Knowledge to enable performance was my only expectation. I believe that on some topics I have gained knowledge and others I have gain some additional perspectives.
2	Higher responsibilities in present organization/industry	35 (12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I hope to get more work related to business in my organization – involvement in prospect presentation, account management • Finance and Accounting courses were key take away as I have an engineering background. Would be able to position as a domain expert on the products in the IT industry
3	Job outside the organization	17 (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In long term, I would like to see myself as successful entrepreneur and this is a step towards that • There are less chances that it will have any effect in my present company in short run but surely in long run I may move from Product development to Program management. It will surely benefit in I switch over to next company in terms of position

4	Personal Development/Satisfaction	64(14)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•This course has made me revisit my “perceived” strengths and weaknesses, realize areas where I need to improve and areas that I need to build on. More than any materialistic expectations, I see myself fresh, renewed, rejuvenated and excited.• The course has given me an immense confidence to handle any assignment in the future even if means a change in the domain
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Table 4: Contributors to learning effectiveness

S.No.	Themes	Percentage of occurrence in the sample (Number of statements)	Sample Statements
1	Pedagogical factors	52(9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case discussions and assignments • The quality of the material content, the ample use of real world case studies
2	Course design (evaluation) factors	47(10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A good number of quiz and assignments • Assignments and projects are the best way to learn
3	Teaching resource	23(6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extra notes/Videos and study guides • Learning effectiveness is directly related to the Professors involvement in conducting such courses
4	Individual factors	11(6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The learning effectiveness purely depends on one's own internal drive - the drive to correlate what is learnt to real life situations (in our respective companies) • Experiment while work especially when you get an opportunity to practice something related to what is learned in the programme
5	Student-Student Interaction	11(2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective networking with peers (co-participants) for knowledge sharing • Online discussions during the class wherein thoughts of various participants could be understood
6	Student-Instructor Interaction	17(4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interaction with the faculty members during the sessions • Her / His (Professor's) capacity to get crowd participation

7	Administrative Support for the programme	11(2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The seriousness and the genuineness of the administration in addressing the concerns of the students also plays an important role in getting the students motivated and dedicated towards the course. • I came to know that XXX was among the first to start the online course and the course was running for many years. This meant that the course administration had experience is handling any technical issues and the Professors were accustomed to teaching with a 570 milli seconds one way delay inherent to all satellite communication.
8	Delivery aspect	17(4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit of the In-campus •(Need) More in-campus module

Table 5: Reasons for perceived organizational support for executive education program

S.No.	Themes	Percentage of occurrence in the sample (Number of statements)	Sample Statements
1	As a reward	6(1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of performance
2	For motivation and retention of employees	29(5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation to employees • Exposure to formal training of management / skill enhancement • Retention of employees
3	To develop people and build leadership in organization	47(15)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational goal can be achieved through the people and the employees are the great assets for them. The existing employees can be given proper platform to sharpen their skills and leadership through this kind of programs, rather than hunting the leaders from the outsides. • To build leadership pipeline