

## Emotional competence and Student Engagement of the First Year Undergraduate Students in Kerala

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between emotional competence and student engagement of the first year undergraduate students in Kerala. Research into both student engagement and student emotional competence is on the increase, with widespread agreement that both are critical determinants of student success in higher education. Less researched are the complex, reciprocal relationships between these important influences. The study was conducted among 600 hundred first year undergraduate students from 12 colleges of the four districts of Kerala. The results demonstrate that there is a significant and positive relationship with the variables of the study. The study throws up conclusively that higher the emotional competence better will be the student engagement.

**Keywords:** *Emotional competence, student engagement, higher education, First year undergraduate students.*

Research into both student engagement and student emotional competence has been on the increase, with widespread agreement that both are critical factors of student success in higher education. Less researched are the complex, reciprocal relationships between these important concepts and their influence in the Indian context. There has been a marked shift from the sole focus on the core cognitive competence of students to their holistic development, which has emphasised the development of various personal and interpersonal competencies especially the emotional competency. According to Stern (2009), an increasing number of educators realize that students who receive an exclusively academic education may be ill-equipped for future challenges, both as persons and members of family and society. Goleman (1999) defined emotional competence as the learned skill for realizing ones' own and others' emotions, for motivation of self and for managing emotions in us and in others.

### *Emotional Competence*

Emotional competence refers to a set of capabilities used to perceive one's feelings and other's emotions, to regulate them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and

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actions (Mayer and Salovey, 1997; Kim et al. 2009). In other words, emotional competence determines how one perceives and manages oneself and others. Goleman (1995) expresses emotional competence as an indicator of the emotional intelligence of individuals and evaluates it within the scope of personal and social competences. Personal competences express the competences required to exhibit constructive behaviours complying with the role of individuals both in their social and work lives. On the other hand, social competences express the competences specifying the nature and success of an individual's personal and social relations.

Emotional competence (Verbeke et al. 2004) is defined as the characteristics and abilities guiding and orienting the emotional practices of individuals, and most of the time it is considered as the integration of emotional intelligence-based learnable characteristics resulting in superior performance in life.

Emotional competence is essentially an acquired and developed personal and social skill, to recognize, interpret, and respond constructively to emotions in self and others, to regulate impulses, use good judgment and adjust emotions in response to others' emotions and reactions

### ***Student Engagement***

Student engagement has been conceptualized as the degree to which a student cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally involves in College. Student engagement is one of the important areas of educational research, especially of educational psychology. It is almost difficult to see how an education system lacking student engagement can lead to positive outcomes. It is reported that student engagement has a positive relationship with quality learning outcomes and academic achievement (Carini, Kuh, and Klein 2006; Coates 2005; Park 2005).

Student engagement is frequently seen as a remedy for the contemporary students' notion of school or college as boring or as a mere grade game (Burkett, 2002; Pope, 2002). Student engagement is also used to describe students' willingness to participate in routine activities, such as attending class, submitting college work, and following class instructions (Chapman, 2003a, 2003b). Some researchers considered student engagement to include students' participation in curriculum planning, classroom management, and other pedagogical involved tasks (Keedy & Drmacich, 1991). Other studies even defined engagement in terms of interest, effort, motivation, time-on-task and the time student spent on a particular learning task (Bulger, Mayer, Almeroth, & Blau, 2008). Recent concept of student engagement has placed much interest in the impact of college context, more particularly in the relationships between campus climate and students' experience of engagement (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009).

A basic understanding of student engagement is that students' activity, involvement, and efforts in their learning tasks is directly related to their academic achievement. Krause and

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Coates (2008) mentioned that student engagement is the quality of effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities that directly contribute to necessary educational outcomes. In other words student engagement is the degree and quality, to which learners are engaged with their educational activities, which are positively connected to a host of desired outcomes, including high grades, student satisfaction, and perseverance (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). In essence, the more students spend quality time and study a subject, the more they will know and learn about it. Similarly, the more students interact academically with faculties, the deeper they are inclined to understand what they are actually learning (Kuh, 2009).

Hence student engagement is considered to be necessary for learning, retention, performance, persistence, experience and achievement (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, and Reschly. 2006; Bryson and Hand 2008; Carini, Kuh, and Klein 2006; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004; McInnis 2005; Tinto 2006). Student engagement is beneficial not only for students' academic efficacy, learning and achievement, but also for their socialisation, welfare, satisfaction with life and effective learning (Lewis 2010; Li, Lerner, and Lerner 2010; Trowler and Trowler 2010).

In the present study, the concept of student engagement is defined as the quality and quantity of students' psychological, cognitive, emotional and behavioural reactions to the learning process, as well as to in-class and out-of-class academic and social activities, to achieve successful learning outcomes. (Gunuca, Kuzub. 2015)

### ***Theoretical Framework***

The relationship between emotional competence and student engagement is established from numerous research studies, which demonstrate how different emotional abilities can have an impact on the ways that students deal with their academic work and social relationships (e.g. Caruso & Wolfe, 2001; Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003; Mestre, Guil, Lopes, Salovey, & Gil-Olarte, 2006; Rode et al., 2007; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2001). Other than that, Fredrickson's (1998, 2001) broaden-and-build theory also lays the ground for the relationship between the two. Their proposition is that the experience of positive emotions promotes exploration and approach behaviours, which in turn, create more learning opportunities. Individuals who are more emotionally competent are more adept at harnessing positive emotions.

Emotional competence is associated with the positive emotions of students, which in turn, can have a beneficial impact on student engagement according to Fredrickson's (1998, 2001) broaden-and-build theory. Positive emotions are indicators or markers of well-being (Fredrickson, 2001). They represent the positive feeling states and attitudes, such as feeling grateful, joyful, interested, expressing appreciation and liking, etc. The different emotional abilities associated with emotional competence also contribute positively to academic learning and social interactions in the process of student engagement.

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**Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory:** The Use of Positive Emotions and Student Engagement. The reciprocal relationship between emotional competence and positive emotions is explained by Tugade and Fredrickson (2001), who pointed out that individuals who are more emotionally competent are able to make more intelligent use of their emotions and hence may be more adept at harnessing positive emotions. Conversely, for individuals who frequently experience positive emotions, they may learn how to make better use of their emotions. In line with Tugade and Fredrickson, Abe (2011) also explained that high levels of emotional competence may serve as a protective factor against low levels of positive emotions. The two, therefore, may reciprocally influence each other.

The theory assumes that the experience of positive emotions serves to broaden humans' thoughts and behaviours and facilitate more adaptive responses to environments, e.g. increasing the flexibility of responding and enhancing approach tendencies, which in turn create increased learning opportunities and accrual of resources and thus further enhance future well-being. Hence studies have time and again reiterated the fact that there is a positive correlation between emotional competence and student engagement.

### ***Back ground of the study***

Kerala, (George, K., 2011) a state known for its high human development and near universal literacy, tops the Indian states in educational attainment in the primary and secondary levels. However, the educational performance and emotional competence of the state assumes a very different stature, quite a deplorable one, when one looks at the achievements in professional and higher education sectors in the state. In fact the state of Kerala lags behind other states in India in economic development. It is argued that the principal reason for this is the neglect of higher education in the state. Upon examining the socio-demographic fabric it can be understood that disparities at the community, gender and regional levels plague the higher and professional education sector in Kerala.

According to Chua, (2014) since the 1990s, Kerala's reported suicide rates have ranked among India's highest, reaching double to triple the national average. While some interpreted the suicide in generational terms others like mental health professionals warned of the poor psychological fitness among Malayali youth today. Although a suicide is an indication of the fault of emotional frailty, it has generated talk among experts about an epidemic inability among the rising generation to endure frustration and disappointment.

Most researchers and higher education practitioners agree that the first year of college is critical for developing a foundation on which academic success and college persistence rest (Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo 2006). When students fail to make a satisfactory transition to the new educational and social demands of university life, the results are manifested by way of drop-out and under-achievement (Lowe & Cook, 2003). The concepts emotional competence and student engagement is gaining widespread acceptance in the West as it is

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found to be positively related to educational outcomes as well as personal development of the students.

### *Purpose*

The study attempts to examine the interrelationship of emotional competence and student engagement among the first-year undergraduate students of the four districts of Kerala. As such, the study aims to investigate the values of emotional competence in facilitating the student engagement of the first year experience.

### *Objectives*

1. To determine the level of Emotional competence of the first year undergraduate students.
2. To identify the level of student engagement among the first year undergraduates
3. To study the relationship between emotional competence and student engagement of first year undergraduate students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study was conducted among the first year undergraduate student of the two educationally backward and two educationally forward districts of Kerala, viz. Kasaragode, Wayanda, Trichur and Ernakulam respectively. A total of 600 first-year students participated in the study. With the exception of gender (males were less in comparison), the sample was broadly representative of the population. There were 374 Female and 226 male participants aged between 17 and 25. Participants were diverse in terms of type of College, location of the College, family structure, Parental occupations and religion. From every selected district three colleges were randomly selected based on the type of management namely government, aided and private.

### *Measures*

The data were collected using two tools namely;

1. **Emotional Competence Scale (ECS):** The emotional competence of the adolescents was measured using the Emotional Competence Scale developed by Sharma and Baharadwaj (1995). It consisted of 30 items on five point scale in Likert model measuring five emotional competencies. The reliability of the scale has been derived by employing Cronbach Alpha reliability method. The reliability of the scales was reported to be 0.84.
2. **First Year Engagement Scales (FYES) :** The First Year Engagement Scale (FYES) was developed by Krause and Coates (2008), which measures student engagement in terms of 7 engagement scales: (i) Transition Engagement Scale, (ii) Academic Engagement Scale, (iii) Peer Engagement Scale, (iv) Student-Staff Engagement Scale, (v) Intellectual Engagement Scale, (vi) Online Engagement Scale, and (vii) Beyond-class Engagement Scale. The reliability of the scale has been derived by employing Cronbach Alpha reliability method. The reliability of the scales was reported to be 0.86.

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The face validity of the items was established through consultation with subject-area experts.

### *Analysis*

Descriptive statistics analysis in the form of percentages and means were used to analyse the demographic data of the participants. T-test and ANOVA test analysis were carried out to assess the differences in students' engagement and emotional competence for the different gender, type of management and revenue districts respectively.

## RESULTS

The objective of the study was to determine the relationship between emotional competence and student engagement of the first year undergraduate students. As per the data higher emotional competency indicates higher student engagement among the first year undergraduate students.

**Table 1. Means, Standard deviations and Correlations of study variables**

SN	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2
1	Emotional Competency (EC)	91.69	12.03	1	-
2	First year engagement scale (FYES)	172.48	25.60	.516**	1

\*.  $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

Table 1 shows that emotional competency is positively as well as significantly correlated with First year Engagement ( $r = .516$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The results suggest that students who score high on Emotional competency are highly engaged.

**Table 2. Independent Sample t test of emotional competence with respect of gender**

Emotional Competence	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t
	Female	374	90.7727	11.07223	
Male	226	93.2212	13.35481		

$P < 0.05$ \*

There is a significant difference in the emotional competence with respect to gender, as the male population of the sample shows higher competency in relation to the female population

**Table 3. Independent Sample t test of student engagement with respect to Gender**

Student Engagement	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t
	Female	374	175.4840	24.90	
Male	226	167.5265	26.03		

$P < 0.01$ \*\*

This study indicates a significant difference in the first year students' engagement with respect to gender as the female population shows higher engagement compared to the male population.

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**Table 4.** One way ANOVA showing the difference in the emotional competence of the students of the different type of colleges.

Type of college	N	Mean	SD	F
Government	148	94.15	9.73	4.687*
Aided	228	91.48	12.19	
Private	224	90.30	12.98	

*P* < 0.05\*

One –way ANOVA tests indicates that there is a significant difference in the emotional competence of the students of different type of colleges namely, Government (M=94.14), aided (M=91.47) and private (M=90.29). The EC of Government college students stands higher than Aided and private colleges.

**Table 5, One way ANOVA showing the difference in the Student Engagement of the students with respect to type of colleges.**

Type of college	N	Mean	SD	F
Government	148	177.6486	23.42	9.340**
Aided	228	174.7456	24.84	
Private	224	166.7768	26.75	

*P* < 0.01\*\*

One –way ANOVA tests indicates that there is significant difference in the student engagement of the students of different type of colleges namely, Government, aided and private .The Student engagement of Government college students stands higher than Aided and private colleges.

## **DISCUSSION**

The first year undergraduate experience is significant and is a topic that is widely researched in the Australian, the American and the British higher education contexts. It is well known that the early experiences with tertiary education are critical in establishing values, attitudes, and approaches to learning that will promote success with the tertiary experience and beyond the undergraduate years (McInnis & James, 1995).

While the results of the study are in support of Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory (1998, 2001), they also provide unprecedented evidence linking emotional competence with student engagement in the first year notwithstanding the fact that numerous studies have already shown the role of emotional competence in academic learning and social relationships.

The survey research was aimed at finding the relationship between emotional competence and student engagement among the first year undergraduate students. Two hypotheses were formulated and tested for their statistical significance. The results show that the emotional competence is positively correlated with student engagement. Previous research has established that positive interventions can enhance well-being (Seear & Vella-brodrick, 2013). The results of the present research are also in concurrence with some of the previous studies which found that emotional competence can enhance student engagement. The current

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study broadened the research on the relationship between emotional competence and student engagement among the first year undergraduate students.

General understanding that female population has higher Emotional competency have been proved to the contrary as the male population indicated significant difference in the EC compared to the females. But as far as student engagement is concerned the females showed significant difference when compared to male population. Findings are suggesting that males are more effective at managing and controlling their own emotions. While females have scored higher than males on positive enhancement of emotions.

Many universities today recognize that students in their first year of study have particular socio-emotional needs on account of their often under-developed emotional skills. The study has provided enough evidence to prove that better emotional competency can enhance student engagement and subsequently student life satisfaction. The study also reveals a flow of influence between emotions, engagement, and life satisfaction and that the relationship is reciprocal and complex and can spiral upwards towards ideal engagement or downwards towards disengagement and withdrawal.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

In the future, it is worthwhile to broaden the scope of the study so as to see if the model can be applicable in the primary and secondary school settings, which would provide evidence for the need to strengthen students' emotional competence at an earlier age in Kerala. It is also mandatory to look into the nuances of higher education in the private domain, in order to enhance and augment the emotional competence and academic engagement of those students in particular.

As far as the limitations of this study are concerned the sample represents fewer male populations in comparison to the female population. The researcher has relied entirely on self-report personality measures.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study contributes to better understanding of the causal relationships between emotional competence, student engagement and student learning outcomes in university students in Kerala.

The study not only unveils the interrelationships among emotional competence, and student engagement, but more importantly, it sheds light on how best to improve the quality of the first year undergraduate education as the findings suggest that the enhancement of emotional competence, and student engagement can have direct or indirect effects to desirable learning outcomes and student satisfaction with life.

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Popular belief that better managed and regimentally disciplined private colleges in the state produce emotionally competent citizens are proved contrary as the so called mis-managed public colleges have better engaged and emotionally competent student community. The study has demonstrated the need to do further studies in the private colleges of Kerala that breeds disengagement and emotional in-competence and the factors that positively promote the same in the Government run colleges.

Further research is required to identify the causes of low emotional competence of the female students in general and proper intervention is required to enhance the emotional competence of the female students in Kerala because women play a crucial role in the mental health of society.

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