



## New normal and competitive advantage: A higher education experience

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### Abstract

The paper argues that competitive advantage, as a global prerequisite for sustenance of higher education in the midst of a drastically changing business environment, is not receiving as much attention in emerging economies as it does in developed climes. Therefore, this study investigated the effect of new normal dimensions on competitive advantage in private universities in South-West Nigeria. A cross-sectional survey research design was applied to obtain data from 322 academic staff from two selected private universities in Ogun State, Nigeria. Participants were selected using simple random sampling. Reliability and validity tests were applied to the adapted questionnaire. The multiple regression analysis results revealed that new normal dimensions had a combined positive and significant effect on competitive advantage. This provided a position to formulate, implement, and sustain (FIS) policies that would enhance employee buy-in, augment academic staff psychological wellbeing, and provide and use high-tech facilities for market dominance to outpace competitors.

**Keywords:** competitive advantage (CA), employee buy-in (EBI), new normal (NN), psycho-wellbeing (PWB), techno-pedagogical competency (TPC).

**JEL Classification:** M10, I23, I31, O33.

### 1. Introduction

Competitive advantage, as a core index in the bid to remain relevant in a dynamic and turbulent business environment, has been evaluated from different perspectives. Scholars have opined that the degree of an organization's competitive advantage, interchangeably, is synonymous with outperforming, outpacing, and outclassing competitors, indicating the variation between the perceived value created and the costs of products or services compared to its direct competitors (Egwakhe et al., 2020; Miotto et al., 2019). Thus, in the opinion of Lestari et al. (2020), the extent to which businesses in a specific region can compete with similar ones elsewhere involves ensuring that businesses are conducted efficiently to achieve high performance and be successful. Interestingly, higher institutions are business brands and highly competitive (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Waller et al., 2019), as the role of universities goes beyond teaching and research (Miotto et al., 2019: 366).

Furthermore, universities in the 21st century are conglomerates and serve as sources of

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financial growth for both the institution, the individual, and the economy (Maulani & Hamdani, 2019; Sadi, 2019; Umukoro & Egwakhe, 2021; Umukoro et al., 2021). Nevertheless, higher education institutions are facing new challenges such as increased internationalization, an ever-changing labor market, and rising demand for innovative and creative teaching and learning methodologies (Chen et al., 2019; Miotto et al., 2019). Moreover, universities compete for higher enrollment quota, enrolling the best students, hiring the most relevant and productive faculty members, obtaining grants and patents, patterning with sought-after institutions, and knowledge-driven growth (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Schuck et al., 2018; UNESCO Courier, 2017). As mentioned earlier, these new challenges are targeted towards achieving and sustaining a competitive advantage.

Nevertheless, higher education in developing countries such as in Nigeria lacks efficient measures to maintain competitive advantage. For instance, the global competitiveness index for higher education revealed that Nigeria ranked 125 of 127 countries in 2017, 116 of 125 in 2018, and 135 of 141 in 2019 (World Economic Forum, 2017-2019), thereby maintaining rankings in the lower regions. Despite these reports, the infusion of technology into teaching in the learning environment (Adeoye et al., 2020; Maulani & Hamdani, 2019; Mishra & Mehta, 2017; Yildiz, 2017), psychological well-being at work (Wong, 2019), and workers commitment/buy-in (Hsia, 2017; Lichtenhaler, 2019) has remained on the back-burner in the strategic thinking of most education sectors in developing countries. Thus, one of the resultant effects is engaging a workforce with mostly below par output, and workers that do not match the needs of the dynamic changes in the workplace (Akinbode & Oyelude, 2020; Onola, 2018).

In light of these commentaries, previous works in different sectors have applied diverse strategies to redefine sustainable competitive advantage. For instance, Choge et al. (2018) considered organizational competencies (knowledge, training, development, and capabilities) as predictors in the banking sector. Egwakhe et al. (2020) used business strategies (regrouping, cost leadership, market development, business diversification, backward integration, and product differentiation) in flourmill companies. In addition, Lorenzon et al. (2018) applied resources and capabilities (technological and managerial) along with strategies (efficiency, marketing, innovation, and low price) to the competitive advantage in the wine industry. Mulenga and Marbán (2020) used digital learning in the education sector. Maulani and Hamdani (2019) considered organizational climate (standards, responsibility, flexibility, rewards, team commitment) and information technology on competitiveness of private universities. Mathur (2015) reported that employees are a valuable source of sustainable competitive advantage. Although these works applied both the quantitative and qualitative methods, limited studies exist in developing countries and higher education. Therefore, this paper determines the effect and sensitivity relationship of new normal (techno-pedagogical competency, psycho-wellbeing, and employee buy-in) on competitive advantage in selected private universities in Ogun State, Nigeria.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1. Competitive Advantage (CA)*

According to Egwakhe et al. (2020), competitive advantage seems to be elusive and as such, it varies in meaning and terminology usage based on industry-specific concepts. It has been defined as dealing with the development and distribution of a set of features that allow excellence (Namada, 2018), superiority in terms of resources and capabilities (Lorenzon et al., 2018), outperforming the competitors (Nuryakin, 2018), and performance above-average on an ongoing basis or providing more or the same value to customers at a lower rate (Jones et

al., 2018; Umar & Sambo, 2021). In addition, the higher market dominance, achievements gained, increased customer patronage, strong brand name, and technological advancement must be retained for several years over other competitors (Cegliński, 2017; Mainardes et al., 2011; Sukaatmadjaa et al., 2021) through offering super-average efficiency and quality (Othman et al., 2020; Umar & Sambo, 2021). Consequently, competitive advantage lasts until rivals outmaneuver it (D'Aveni et al., 2010; Pietrewicz, 2019).

## 2.2. *New Normal (NN)*

The term “new normal” first emerged in the field of business but it has been used interchangeably in different contexts to mean “something which was previously not typical has become typical” (Cahapay, 2020, p. 2). For instance, scholars used the term *new normal* to describe numerous characteristics of recently observed climate and weather changes (Lewis et al., 2017), China’s economic emergence through agile leadership (Green & Stern, 2015; Narisetti, 2020; Xi, 2014), rejuvenating industrial economies to normal post-recession (El-Erian, 2010), and more recently as post-COVID-19 pandemic era (Adeoye et al., 2020; Buheji, 2020). The Urban Dictionary (2009) described “New Normal” as “the situation of being after some intense change that has occurred. It substitutes the accepted, habitual, usual state after a certain event happened.” As such, Berwick (2020) averred that some “NN” may emerge in which novel systems and assumptions will replace many others long taken for granted; thus, it should be viewed not as predictions, but as a series of choices to meet new demands, thereby stating specifically that tempo, standards, working conditions, proximity, preparedness, and equity are at least six properties of care for a durable change in a pandemic. Buheji and Buheji (2020) added that in the “NN” era, agility, curiosity, risk mitigation, learning by exploring, learning by doing, and focus are highly expected. Nevertheless, since the new normal requires resourceful solutions that improve and leverage on multiple fronts (Buheji, 2020), this paper focused on techno-pedagogical competency (TPC), psycho-wellbeing (PWB), and employee buy-in (EBI) as dimensions of new normal (NN).

### 2.2.1. *Techno-Pedagogical Competency (TPC)*

According to Thakur (2015), techno-pedagogical competency is the hybrid method of teaching, in which information and communications technology (ICT) is used for teaching and learning. While pedagogy refers to the art-science of teaching, “techno” (derived from the Latin word “texere”) means ‘weave or construct’ (Yildiz, 2017). Thus, techno-pedagogy refers to weaving the techniques of the craft of teaching into the learning environment itself. Competency on the other hand is defined as adequate for the purpose, suitable, sufficient or as legally qualified, admissible or as capable, the ability to do something successfully or efficiently, and the will to regularly apply the attitude, knowledge, and skills that promote teaching and learning (Anand, 2019; Buyukalan et al., 2018; Srikanta et al., 2021). Techno-pedagogical competency is needed for teachers in their learning space to facilitate teaching and learning (Anand, 2019). Consequently, in addition to a teacher having the competency in technology and pedagogy, the individual is expected to know the existing components and capabilities of various technologies used in teaching and learning settings (Guru & Beura, 2019; Parkash & Hooda, 2018). Hence, techno-Pedagogy decides whether an Education media product is successful or not.

### 2.2.2. *Psycho-Wellbeing (PWB)*

Psycho-wellbeing (PWB) is a diverse multidimensional concept referring to positive mental health that develops through a combination of emotional regulation, personality characteristics, identity, and life experience (Ukeh & Hassan, 2018). Other scholars have referred to PWB as engagement with existential challenges of life (Keyes & Shmotkin, 2002; Naseem, 2018). Wong (2019) and Mbazor et al. (2018) have added that it is the combination of feeling good and functioning effectively. Therefore, people with high psycho-wellbeing report, for instance, feeling happy, capable, well-supported, and satisfied with life. Experiencing high levels of subjective well-being, according to Diener et al. (2018), is considered to be a central criterion of positive mental health. In addition, wellbeing contributes to favorable life circumstances such as academic success and higher performance (Qiao et al., 2011). Moreover, Umukoro, Egwakhe, and Ajike (2020) and Mbazor et al. (2018) claimed that demands at work, clarity of roles, and employee's possibilities for influencing the performance of tasks, with feelings such as vigor, motivation, fatigue, and anxiety, are some of the factors that play a part when evaluating the psycho-wellbeing.

### 2.2.3. *Employee Buy-In (EBI)*

Employee buy-in refers interchangeably to employee commitment (affective) and engagement (Lichtenthaler, 2019), although, that paper referred to it more as a commitment to organizational goals. To understand the diverse concept of the term employee buy-in, Hsia (2017) defined buy-in as the acceptance of and willingness to actively support and participate in a proposed plan or policy. Hence, the concept of employee "buy-in" is necessary during planned changes and initiation of new ideas to rival competitors for management to achieve success and high performance (Kotter, 1995; McAllaster, 2004). Willumsen et al. (2018) added that 'EBI' involves employees having commitment to the goals of the organization and finding the day-to-day work personally resonant. As such, buy-in promotes engagement and a willingness to go the extra mile on the job. Lucas (2019, p. 1) claimed,

When employees accept decisions or changes, they are more likely to be productive when tasked or when changes are introduced. Although buy-in is not necessarily receiving 100% agreement from every employee rather, it is the commitment and or support of whatever has been implemented.

Thus, the concept of 'EBI' aligns with other scholars' perceptions regarding the commitment of workers (Umukoro & Egwakhe, 2019; Umukoro, Egwakhe, & Akpa, 2020) to their jobs and the organizational goals.

## 2. 3. *New Normal and Competitive Advantage*

Previous studies on new normal and competitive advantage have shown varied results based on the predictor variables applied to competitive advantage. For instance, Egwakhe et al. (2020) applied business strategies and found a statistically significant effect on competitive advantage. Similarly, other works found interaction with resources and capabilities, effective performance, and gaining market dominance in both education and other sectors in the new normal (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2010; Mulenga & Marbán, 2020; Rosell et al., 2020).

Lorenzo et al. (2018) found a significant relationship between the competitive strategy, resources, and capabilities of the firms and their technological and managerial capabilities with business performance for competitive advantage. Earlier, Mazzarol et al. (1998) study findings aligned with Lorenzo et al. (2018) that information technology is a source of

competitive advantage in marketing international education, and that information technology in its various forms is well placed to assist educational institutions to achieve competitive advantage in the global marketplace. Maulani and Hamdani (2019) findings supports Mazzarol et al. (1998) that information technology and organizational climate have influence on the competitiveness of private universities.

Building on previous findings, the work of Buheji and Ahmed (2020) reported that the COVID-19 pandemic brought in many hidden and visible opportunities and challenges that are unique and need to be explored and exploited to gain market dominance. As such, Carroll and Conboy (2020) hypothesized that the reality is that the pandemic is by no means short-term, and these new technology-driven practices will now form part of the new normal. Thus, evidence from an empirical study by Umar and Sambo (2021) showed a positive and significant relationship between IT capabilities, human resources, and knowledge management to gain a competitive advantage. With regards to the education sector, Krstic', Filipe, and Chavaglia (2020) study revealed that there is a strong correlation between higher education on the one hand and the competitiveness of businesses and the economy and sustainable development on the other, thereby supporting Thakur (2015) findings that technology knowledge is important, but not as a separate entity but rather as a system.

Other works corroborated Thakur's (2015) finding that introducing technology to the educational process is not adequate unless teachers integrate technology that has the potential to bring about viable changes in the educational process (Henriksen et al., 2018; Leema & Saleem, 2017; Mishra & Mehta, 2017; Rokanta, 2017; Waller et al., 2019). Accordingly, Habib (2018) suggested that the level of techno-pedagogical competency showed a direct and proportional relationship with teacher effectiveness. However, Guru and Beura's (2019) findings revealed that the majority of teachers have a moderate level of techno-pedagogical competency. Anand (2019) findings supported Guru and Beura (2019), indicating that the faculty members have above-average techno-pedagogical competency. As such, the level of technology usage and competency by workers could indicate the availability and adequacy of the infrastructure and/or commitment towards the strategy. Consequently, a link could exist between new normal dimensions applied in this study and sustaining competitive advantage.

#### *2.4. Theoretical Review*

This paper was anchored on the resource-based view (RBV) and normalization process theory (NPT). The propounded of the RBV (Porter, 1985) revealed the competitive advantage factor to be the main factor in winning the competition. Moreover, Wernerfelt's (1984) work reiterated that the way the resource was possessed, deployed, and used by the organization determined competitiveness. Porter (1985) added that the organization is a bundle of assets or resources tied semi-permanently in a business. As such, the resource-based vision principle is a strategic element with the use of assets and expertise to be an advantage for competition (Dimitrova & Dimitrova, 2017; La Rocca et al., 2018). Therefore, the relevance of the theory supports this paper in that inimitable resources and capabilities (new normal – NN) available in the education sector – such as techno-pedagogical competency (TPC), psycho-wellbeing (PWB), and employee buy-in (EBI) – could drive competitive advantage (CA).

Umar and Sambo (2021) opined that the success of a business relies on its ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to achieve new forms of competitive advantage. Accordingly, resources and capabilities that present the characteristics of rarity, appropriability, non-reproducibility, and non-substitutability could lead to a competitive advantage (Hossain et al., 2021; Mainardes et al., 2011). Thus, the relevance of techno-pedagogical competency [TPC] ( $x_1$ ), psycho-wellbeing [PWB] ( $x_2$ ), and employee

buy-in [EBI] ( $x_3$ ) – as measures of new normal [NN] ( $X$ ) – on competitive advantage [CA] ( $Y$ ) in higher education in the post-COVID-19 period cannot be underestimated. This is expressed mathematically as:  $CA = \beta_0 + \beta_1TPC_i + \beta_2PWB_i + \beta_3EBI_i + \mu_i$

In light of the submission above, this paper's hypothesis are thus stated as follows:

$H_{01}$ : New normal dimensions (techno-pedagogical competency, psycho-wellbeing, and employee buy-in) have no significant effect on competitive advantage.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design Procedure

Grounded on previous studies conducted, the paper's methodical architectural design was set on the cross-sectional survey research design to deepen the understanding of a specific population at a particular time and to focus on facts and information about people's beliefs, opinions, motivations, and behavioral patterns (Zikmund et al., 2012; Umukoro et al., 2021). The rationalization for selecting the survey design is consistent with the works of Hsia (2017) on the role of organizational buy-in in employee retention, and Miotto et al. (2019) on reputation and legitimacy as the key factors for higher education institutions' sustained competitive advantage. Other works such as Patrinos and Shmis (2020) studied whether technology can help mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on education systems in Europe and Central Asia. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2010) focused on market orientation in universities in a comparative investigation of two national higher education systems in Indonesia.

Our study population was comprised of 1,035 academic staff in two selected private universities in Ogun State, Nigeria. Academic staff ranked as Lecturer II, Lecturer I, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor/Reader, and Professor/Reader were used as the target population since these academics carry out research, teach, and are involved in community service (University of Salford, 2016).

Ogun State was selected as the geo-political location since it has the highest number of private universities in Nigeria and the two top-ranked private universities in Nigeria (based on academic standards, facilities, and webometric ranking) (National Universities Commission [NUC], 2020). Although there are 99 private universities in Nigeria as of 2021 (NUC, 2021), the number of private universities in 2020 (79) was considered since twenty (20) additional private universities were licensed in February 2021. Thus, according to NUC (2020), 11 of the 79 private universities in Nigeria are in Ogun State, inferring that as earlier stated, 14 percent of the total number of private universities in Nigeria and two of the top-ranked private universities in Nigeria are located in Ogun State (NUC, 2020).

The two selected private universities based on the criteria mentioned were Babcock University in Ilishan-Remo (licensed in 1999 and 2<sup>nd</sup> top-ranked private university) and Covenant University in Ota (licensed in 2002 and 1<sup>st</sup> top-ranked private university) in Ogun State Nigeria. In addition, the two private universities seamlessly migrated to online classes, convocation programs, and all other administrative and academic programs during the Covid-19 pandemic (for instance, Babcock University Doctorate Hooding Ceremony Class of 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQJe--ST2VY>). The job description of academic staff includes producing novel ideas that are effective and useful through teaching, research/publication, and community service as output to outperform competitors, but this is at a low level in Nigeria's higher education. Hence, private universities were set up to expand access to higher education; increase the quality of education, service, and productive capacity; and encourage both internal and external efficiency of the system. However, the COVID-19

pandemic has been a huge challenge towards achieving and sustaining competitive advantage in all sectors, with the education industry not spared.

The paper applied the sample size table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) for a finite population to determine the sample size for the study at 95 percent confidence level and 5 percent margin error. Thus, a sample size of 378 participants, which included an additional 30% sample size to reduce the number of either unreturned data or missing data (Zikmund et al., 2015), was selected. The paper adopted the simple random sampling technique, while a well-structured questionnaire was used as the research instrument with items adapted from previous research instruments. This online questionnaire was filled by participants electronically. Using online technology, a pilot test was conducted on the questionnaire along with validity and reliability test to ensure the instrument could measure what it was projected to measure in the paper taking into reflection how well the concept was defined by the measure. A result of 0.7 and higher was achieved in the pilot test. In addition, based on the pilot test results, the number of question items was reduced after applying factor analysis. This was done to eliminate question items that reduced either the suitability of the data (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin [KMO] or strength of the relationship among the variables (Bartlett test) (see Appendix 1). Moreover, content, criterion, and construct validity were established to examine the validity of the instrument (Griffie, 2012). Consequently, the following statistical validation scores were achieved: competitive advantage ( $\alpha$ ) = 0.88, techno-pedagogical competency ( $\alpha$ ) = 0.87, psycho-wellbeing ( $\alpha$ ) = 0.84, employee buy-in ( $\alpha$ ) = 0.85) (Hsia, 2017; Lorenzo et al., 2018; Umukoro, Egwakhe, & Ajike, 2020).

The validated reliability result through Cronbach's alpha coefficients from the internal consistency test showed that competitive advantage ( $\alpha$ ) was 0.89 and new normal dimensions ranged from 0.82 to 0.88. Primary data sourced from the sampled private universities were used in this paper. While the multiple regression analysis was applied to study the effects, artificial neural networks (ANN) was used to analyze the complex sensitivity relationships in data via simulation to detect patterns in data through Statistical Package for Service Solutions (SPSS) 22.0. Consequently, the multiple regression equation was established based on the dimensions of the new normal. Hence, the model was formulated regarding the research objective, as follows:

$Y = f(X)^n$  that is:

$Y = f(x_1, x_2, x_3)$

$$Y = \alpha_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \beta_3 x_3 + \mu_i \quad (1)$$

where: Y = competitive advantage (CA)

X = new normal dimensions (NND)

where:

$x_1$  = techno-pedagogical competency (TPC)

$x_2$  = psycho-wellbeing (PWB)

$x_3$  = employee buy-in (EBI)

The functional relationship of the model is presented as:

$$\sum(\text{TPC} + \text{PWB} + \text{EBI}) = \text{NND}$$

$$\text{Hence: CA} = \alpha_0 + \beta_1 \text{TPC}_i + \beta_2 \text{PWB}_i + \beta_3 \text{EBI}_i + \mu_i \quad (2)$$

Where:

$\beta_0$  = Constant term

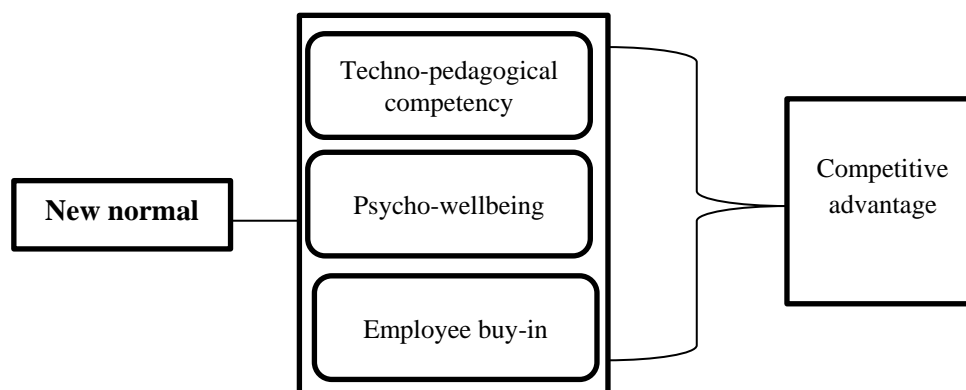
$\beta_1$  = Coefficient of techno-pedagogical competency

$\beta_2$  = Coefficient of psycho-wellbeing

$\beta_3$  = Coefficient of employee buy-in

$\mu$  = Error term (Stochastic variable).

Applying multiple regression and artificial neural networks statistical analysis, the hypothesis was tested at a 95% confidence interval. The study predicted that a positive and significant relationship would be observed between new normal dimensions and competitive advantage. Adherence to the ethics of research was strictly followed regarding confidentiality, anonymity, respect for human dignity, non-falsification of data, and non-manipulation of data was applied in the data collection and collation process. In addition, sources obtained from the studies of other scholars were duly acknowledged. Figure 1 and Table 1 below illustrate the relationship between variables of the study.



**Figure 1.** Relationships between variables

**Table 1.** Summary Illustrating the Relationship Between New Normal Dimensions and Competitive Advantage

	CA	TPC	PWB	EBI
CA	1			
TPC	0.501**	1		
PWB	0.637**	0.551**	1	
EBI	0.667**	0.514**	0.624**	1

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Field analysis (2021)

Where:

- CA = Competitive advantage
- TPC = Techno-pedagogical competency
- PWB = Psycho-wellbeing
- EBI = Employee buy-in

### 3.2. Interpretation

Table 1 reveals the relationship between new normal dimensions (techno-pedagogical competency, psycho-wellbeing, employee buy-in) and competitive advantage in selected private universities in Ogun State Nigeria. It shows that new normal dimensions have a positive and significant relationship with competitive advantage. Pearson correlation coefficients between predictor variables range from  $r=0.501$  to  $r=0.667$ , and the relationships are positive. Techno-pedagogical competency has a moderately strong positive and significant relationship with competitive advantage ( $r = 0.501$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Psycho-wellbeing has a moderately strong positive and significant relationship with competitive advantage ( $r = 0.637$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), while employee buy-in also has a moderately strong positive and significant relationship with competitive advantage ( $r = 0.667$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Generally, all the three



dimensions of new normal used in this paper are significantly and positively associated with competitive advantage in selected private universities in Ogun State Nigeria.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Analytical Findings

To determine if new normal dimensions have no significant effect on and sensitivity relationship with competitive advantage in selected private universities in Ogun State Nigeria, the researchers applied multiple regression analysis and artificial neural network analysis. The predictor variables were new normal dimensions, while the dependent variable was competitive advantage. Data from 322 participants were collected and analyzed. The results of the descriptive distribution of respondents' answers to the cumulative question items for each variable in this paper are presented in Table 2, the demographic characteristics are shown in Table 3, and the results of multiple regression analysis and artificial neural network analyses are shown in Tables 4 and 5.

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Techno-pedagogical competency	322	3.00	6.00	4.7981	.69237
Psycho-wellbeing	322	1.00	6.00	4.3789	.90305
Employee buy-in	322	2.00	6.00	4.5559	.84185
Competitive advantage	322	2.00	6.00	4.5590	.83792
Valid N (listwise)	322				

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics (mean, maximum, minimum, and standard deviation) of respondents' answers to new normal dimensions (techno-pedagogical competency, psycho-wellbeing, and employee buy-in) and competitive advantage. The mean scores based on answers to a six-point Likert scale were interpreted as follows: 1.00 to 1.49 as strongly disagree/low extent; 1.50 to 2.49 as disagree/very low extent; 2.50 and 3.49 as partially disagree/partially low extent; 3.50 and 4.49 as partially agree/partially high extent, and 4.50 and 5.49 as agree/high extent; while between 5.50 and 6.00 as strongly agree/very high extent. Consequently, on the premise of the responses on the mean scores, respondents agreed and partially agreed that techno-pedagogical competency and psycho-wellbeing affect competitive advantage in higher institution. In addition, employee buy-in affects competitive advantage to a very high extent. The analyses were facilitated using SPSS (22 Edition).

### 4.2. Analysis of Demographic Characteristics

This section presents respondents demographic characteristics grouped by gender, age, and length of service in university.

The profile of participants by gender reveals that 131 (40.7%) were male while 191 (59.3%) were female, indicating that more of the academic staff members in this study were female. Profile by age reveals that 41 (12.7%) are 21-30 years, 115 (35.7%) 31-40 years, 112 (34.8%) 41-50 years, 45 (13.0%) 51-60 years, and 9 (3.8%) 61 years and above. This shows that most of the respondents were 31-50 years as depicted by 70.5%. Respondents profile by years of experience in university revealed that 111 (34.5%) had 0-2 years' experience, 139 (43.2%) 3-5 years, and 72 (22.3%) 6 years or above. This indicates that the majority of the

participants had 3-5 years of experience in the university, which could mean respondents were knowledgeable about the phenomenon under study.

**Table 3.** Respondents Demographic Characteristics

Variables	Characteristics	Student respondents in this study N= 322	
		Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	131	40.7
	Female	191	59.3
	Total	322	100.0
Age	21-30	41	12.7
	31-40	115	35.7
	41-50s	112	34.8
	51-60	45	13.0
	61 and above	9	3.8
	Total	322	100.0
Years of experience in university	0-2	111	34.5
	3-5	139	43.2
	6 and above	72	22.3
<b>Total</b>		<b>322</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Field survey, 2021

**Table 4.** Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for New Normal Dimensions and Competitive Advantage in Selected Private Universities in Ogun State Nigeria

N	Model	B	Sig.	T	ANOVA (Sig.)	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F (df)
322	(Constant)	0.740	0.000	3.147	0.0000 <sup>b</sup>	0.730	0.533	0.529	121.166 (3,318)
	Techno-pedagogical competency	0.140	0.016	2.430					
	Psycho-wellbeing	0.296	0.000	6.113					
	Employee buy-In	0.406	0.000	8.044					
Predictors: (Constant), employee buy-in, techno-pedagogical competency, psycho-wellbeing Dependent variable: Competitive advantage									

Source: Field survey, 2021

See appendix 2 for full regression result

#### 4.3. Findings

The analysis in Table 4 shows the results of the multiple regression analysis conducted to determine the effect of new normal dimensions (techno-pedagogical competency, psycho-wellbeing, and employee buy-in) on competitive advantage in selected private universities in Ogun State Nigeria. The aggregated results of the analysis reveal that new normal dimensions has had a significant positive effect on competitive advantage (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.529$  ( $F(3, 318) = 121.166$ ,  $p=0.000$ )). Likewise, results for the individual multiple regression analysis reveal that techno-pedagogical competency ( $\beta = 0.140$ ,  $t = 2.430$ ,  $p = 0.016$ ), psycho-wellbeing ( $\beta = 0.296$ ,  $t = 6.113$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), and employee buy-in ( $\beta = 0.406$ ,  $t = 8.044$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) have had positive and statistically significant effects on competitive advantage. The results indicate that all the three dimensions of new normal implemented in this paper have had positive and significant effects on competitive advantage in the selected private universities in Ogun State Nigeria. Furthermore, the results reveal that employee buy-in was the best individual predictor.

The multiple regression aggregated results further reveal that the relationships between new normal dimensions (techno-pedagogical competency, psycho-wellbeing, and employee buy-in) and competitive advantage in selected private universities in Ogun State Nigeria have been strong and positive ( $R = 0.730$ ). Likewise, the goodness of fit model presented in Table

4 with adjusted  $R^2 = 0.533$  indicates that new normal dimensions explained 53.3% of the changes in competitive advantage in selected private universities in Ogun State Nigeria, while the remaining 46.7% could be attributed to other factors not included in this model. Correspondingly, the  $F$ -statistics ( $df = 3, 318$ ) = 121.166 at  $p = 0.000$  ( $p < 0.05$ ) show that the overall model is statistically significant in predicting the effect of new normal on competitive advantage. This implies that new normal dimensions had a significant positive effect on competitive advantage in selected private universities in Ogun State Nigeria.

The multiple regression model is expressed as follows:

$$CA = 0.740 + 0.140TPCi + 0.296PWB_i + 0.406EBI_i \quad (3)$$

Where:

CA = Competitive advantage

TPC = Techno-pedagogical competency

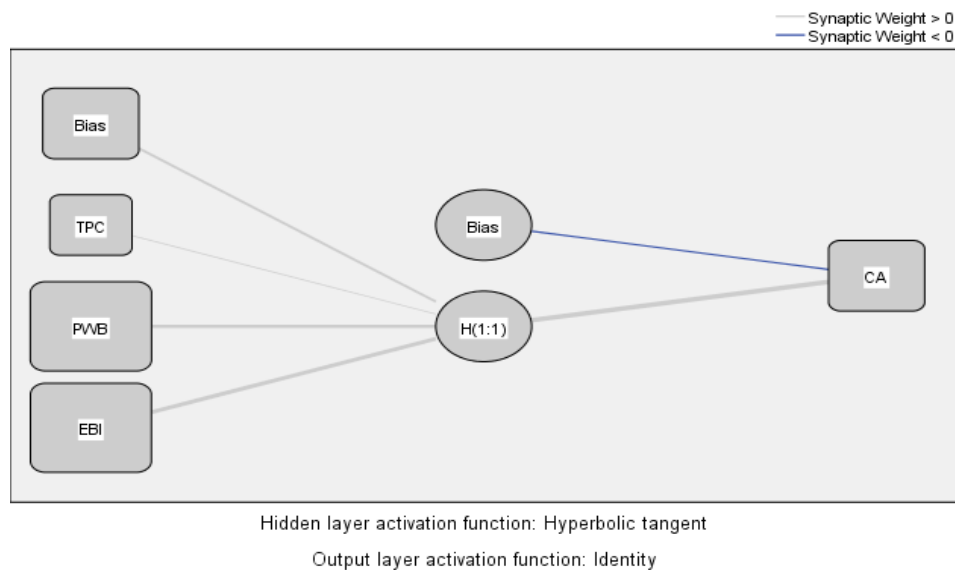
PWB = Psycho-wellbeing

EBI = Employee buy-in

The regression model equation reveals that  $\beta_0$  was 0.740 when  $X = 0$ . The value 0.740 inferred that statistically holding new normal dimensions to a constant zero, competitive advantage would be 0.740, implying that without new normal dimensions, competitive advantage in the selected private universities in Ogun State Nigeria would be 0.740. This is an indication of improvement (that is, statistically, the selected private universities would outpace competitors by 74%). Moreover, the analysis also revealed that for the coefficient (parameter estimate) results, when techno-pedagogical competency, psycho-wellbeing, and employee buy-in are improved by one unit, achieving and sustaining competitive advantage would increase by 0.140, 0.296, and 0.406 units, respectively. That is, statistically speaking, sustaining competitive advantage in terms of the rate of outperforming competitors and higher market dominance in the education sector would increase by 14%, 29.6%, and 40.6%, respectively, with employee buy-in having the highest rate of effect on competitive advantage. This could occur over both a short-term and/or a long-term period in higher institutions. This indicates that via a statistics stance, an increase in techno-pedagogical competency, psycho-wellbeing, and employee buy-in as dimensions of new normal would lead to an increase in competitive advantage in selected private universities in Ogun State Nigeria.

#### 4.4. Artificial Neural Network (Multilayer Perceptron)

Based on the results from the artificial neural network architecture diagram (Figure 2), the synaptic weight shows higher relationship between the predictor variable of employee buy-in (EBI) (0.273). This contrasts the synaptic weights of psycho-wellbeing (PWB) (0.189) and techno-pedagogical competency (TPC) (0.067), respectively. Nonetheless, the predictor variables had positive effect on competitive advantage. This was supported by the parameter estimates (as shown in Table 5) considering both the hidden and output layers of the analysis that employee buy-in was the strongest determinant with parameter estimate value of 0.273 in the H(1:1) hidden layer. Aggregately, hidden layer H(1:1) had output effect of 1.857. The observations from the algorithm results correctly identified the model and also projected the parameters with a high degree of certainty and accuracy regarding competitive advantage determinants.



**Figure 2.** Artificial Neural Network (ANN) Architecture Diagram

The model acknowledged the dynamism and the parameter estimation algorithm that would be integrated to form a predictive system for competitive advantage.

**Table 5.1.** Parameter Estimates Table of New Normal

Predictor	Predicted	
	Hidden layer 1	Output layer
	H(1:1)	CA
Input layer	(Bias)	0.160
	TPC	0.067
	PWB	0.189
	EBI	0.273
Hidden layer 1	(Bias)	-0.283
	H(1:1)	1.857

Source: SPSS Output Independent Variable Importance

**Table 5.2.** Case Processing Summary Table

		N	Percent
Sample	Training	225	69.9%
	Testing	97	30.1%
	Valid	322	100.0%
	Excluded	0	
	Total	322	

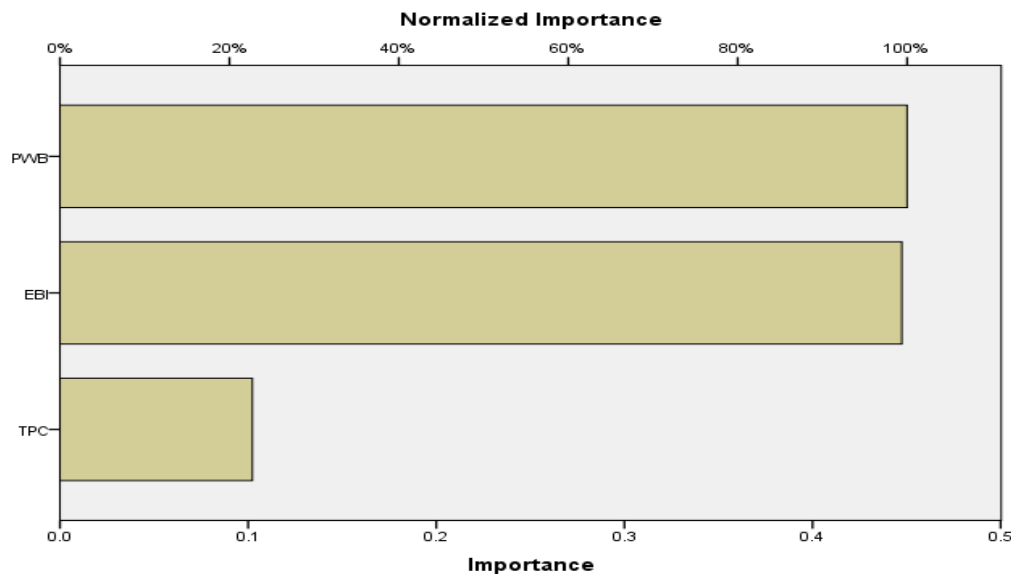
Source: SPSS output case processing summary

Table 5.2 and Figure 2 further contain an analysis, which computes the significance and the normalized importance of each predictor in determining the neural network. The analysis is based on the training and testing samples, which includes 225 (69.9%) cases assigned to the training sample and 97 (30.1%) testing samples with no data excluded. It is important to note that this process further authenticates the suitability of the data used in carrying out the analysis. The normalized importance represents the important values divided by the largest important values and stated as percentages. Hence, from Table 5.3 and Figure 3 it is evident that “psycho-wellbeing” (0.450/100.0%) contributes more to competitive advantage in the neural network model construction, followed by “employee buy-in” (0.337/99.4%) and “techno-pedagogical competency” (0.102/22.7%).”

**Table 5.3.** Independent Variable Importance of New Normal Dimensions

	Importance	Normalized importance
Techno-pedagogical competency	0.102	22.7%
Psycho-wellbeing	0.450	100.0%
Employee buy-in	0.447	99.4%

Source: SPSS Output Independent Variable Importance



**Figure 3.** Ranking of studied variables influence on the competitive advantage based on Their Importance

In summary, the data was obtained from respondents and was entered into the algorithm. The results provided additional aggregated information on the effect of the predictor new normal dimensions (techno-pedagogical competency, psycho-wellbeing, and employee buy-in) on competitive advantage. When compared with that of the conventional linear regression method used for the hypothesis in Table 4, it denoted a large degree of similarity but differed in the area of psycho-wellbeing and employee buy-in. Nevertheless, this observation did not imply double permeability; rather, it exhibited variations in the level of importance among the tested parameters. Consequently, the application of the different statistical tools deepened empirical insight and expanded the range of methodological analysis to inform the effect of new normal dimensions on competitive advantage.

## 5. Discussion

The results obtained for the effects of new normal dimensions on competitive advantage in selected private universities in Ogun State, Nigeria were reassuring despite limited previous studies conducted in Nigeria. Moreover, of the three predictor variables, employee buy-in (EBI) was the best predictor of competitive advantage, followed by psycho-wellbeing (PWB) and techno-pedagogical competency (TPC) based on the sensitivity relationship. The findings showed similarities and disparities with findings based on individual predictors from previous researchers such as Buheji and Ahmed (2020), Carroll and Conboy (2020), Hsia (2017), Krsti'c, et al. (2020), Lorenzo et al. (2018), Umar and Sambo (2021) and Umukoro, Egwakhe, and Akpa (2020).

Conceptually, employee buy-in denotes the acceptance of and willingness to actively

support and participates in a proposed plan or policy (Hsia, 2017). As such, earlier scholars found that employee “buy-in” is important during planned changes and initiation of new ideas to rival competitors (Kotter, 1995; McAllaster, 2004). Umukoro, Egwakhe, and Akpa (2020) affirmed that since committed employees are optimistic, focused on the work, result-oriented, enthusiastic, willing to go the extra mile, take pride in their work, and believe in the goals and values of the organization, buy-in drives businesses to compete better than their competitors. Agreeing with this paper’s results regarding employee buy-in and psycho-wellbeing, Wong (2019) and Mbazor et al. (2018) postulated that people with high psycho-wellbeing report feeling happy, capable, well-supported, and satisfied with life, which is a combination recipe of feeling good and functioning effectively, and a central criterion of positive mental health (Diener et al., 2018). Therefore, both predictor variables (employee buy-in and psycho-wellbeing) contribute to favorable life circumstances such as academic success and higher performance (Qiao et al., 2011) as a strategy to outclass competitors.

Further, it was found that techno-pedagogical competency also has a positive significant effect on competitive advantage. This indicates that, the study findings are empirically aligned with previous scholars findings. For instance, the level of techno-pedagogical competency showed a direct and proportional relationship with teacher effectiveness (Habib, 2018; Henriksen et al., 2018; Mishra & Mehta, 2017), as it is the hybrid method of teaching in which information and communications technology (ICT) is used for teaching, and learning (Maulani & Hamdani, 2019; Thakur, 2015). Moreover, the significance of techno-pedagogical competency linking with employee buy-in and psycho-wellbeing to outperform competitors in the higher institution cannot be underestimated. Willumsen et al. (2018) and Lucas (2019) reported that employee buy-in – which involves employee commitment to the goals of the organization, acceptance of decisions or changes – is more likely to be productive when tasked or when changes are introduced. In addition, Lovell and Beckstrand (2015) and Gorondutse and John (2018) posited that improved well-being have an influence on workers and their work output to outpace other businesses.

Despite these findings, some observed disparities could be a result of industry-specific traits, geographical location/country, or workers’ demographic and personality composition of where the studies were conducted. This position supports Cegliński (2017) argument that notwithstanding the concept of competitive advantages, the modern-day changes in the environments of organizations make competitive advantage more multifaceted, and the associations between sources and drivers of the advantages and results activities are more unobvious. Nonetheless, Lorenzo et al. (2018) found a significant relationship between the competitive strategy, resources, and capabilities of the business as well as their technological and managerial capabilities with business performance. Similarly, an earlier work by Mazzarol et al. (1998) aligned with Lorenzo et al. (2018) findings that information technology is a source of competitive advantage in marketing international education. Thus, evidence from empirical studies by Umar and Sambo (2021), Rokanta (2017), and Waller et al. (2019) showed a positive and significant relationship between technology capabilities, human resources, and knowledge management to gain a competitive advantage.

Nevertheless, according to Thakur (2015), knowledge about the technology is important. Moreover, the way teachers integrate technology has the potential to bring about viable changes in the educational process (Chen et al., 2019; Henriksen et al., 2018; Leema & Saleem, 2017; Mishra & Mehta, 2017, Waller et al., 2019). As such, Krstić et al. (2020) concurred that a strong correlation exists between higher education on the one hand and the competitiveness of businesses and the economy as well as sustainable development on the other. These discussions corroborated the work of Wernerfelt’s (1984) that the way resource is possessed, deployed, and used by the organization determines competitiveness. According

to Porter and Millar (1985), an organization is a bundle of assets or resources tied semi-permanently in a business. Hence Dimitrova and Dimitrova (2017) and Umar and Sambo (2021) opined that the success of a business relies on its ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to achieve new forms of competitive advantage. Consequently, it is germane to promote employee buy-in alongside the implementation of psycho-wellbeing, including the provision and use of technology in teaching as new normal dimensions strategy to outclass competitors in higher institutions.

## 6. Conclusion

Findings from the collated and analyzed data established that new normal dimensions had a combined positive and significant effect on and sensitivity relationship with competitive advantage in the selected private universities in Ogun State Nigeria. In addition, employee buy-in was the best individual predictor of competitive advantage. Generally, the study concluded that workers (academic staff) are the catalyst in industries (universities), and their commitment and wellbeing should not be glossed over during the promotion of technology as a new normal dimension strategy for achieving and sustaining competitive advantage both in short and long terms.

Additionally, beyond the Nigerian University environment, this paper's results will also be relevant in other countries and continents towards sustaining competitive advantage in both education and other sectors. This can be achieved by introducing motivational measures (e.g., extrinsic and intrinsic factors) to strengthen workers commitment and mental wellbeing, especially in the pre- and post-pandemic era, providing and promoting high-tech facilities and usage. This paper thereby recommends management to formulate, implement, and sustain (FIS) policies that would enhance employee buy-in/commitment (in the short-run), augment academic staff psycho-wellbeing (in the short run), and provide high-tech facilities and usage (in the short and long run) to attain market dominance and outpace competitors in both emerging and developed economies. Hence, based on findings, it is empirically viable to submit that the practical implementation of a new normal concept for outperforming, outpacing, and outclassing competing institutions is germane since higher institutions/universities are business brands and are subjected to similar scrutiny of the market-place, and are also impacted by Covid-19 pandemic and other dynamic business environmental changes.

## 7. Research Implications

The results drawn from this study are relevant to scholars and researchers as it enables them to advance their scope in conducting related studies to fill existing gaps in literature regarding unit of analysis, scope, and analytical gaps. They can contribute to the body of knowledge conceptually, empirically, and theoretically since limited studies have covered the concept of the new normal dimensions (techno-pedagogical competency, psycho-wellbeing, and employee buy-in) applied in this paper. This was augmented by our attention to the competitive advantages that exist in developing countries, especially in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Moreover, the results of this study are useful for the practitioners. They should note that the paper has been able to establish that new normal dimensions (techno-pedagogical competency, psycho-wellbeing, and employee buy-in) had an aggregated positive and significant effect on competitive advantage with employee buy-in as the best individual dimension. Therefore, it is important to ensure that employees stay loyal and dedicated to the goals of the organization in line with providing care for their mental health to ensure

achievement and sustenance of competitive advantage. The provision and usage of high-tech facilities is important; however, if workers mental health is not optimally maintained and if they do not buy-in into the goals behind the usage of technology, the possibility of remaining relevant in the industry to outclass and outpace competitors may be defeated regardless of the sector. Thus, while the importance of infusing technology into today's business workplace environment is not debatable for sustaining competitive advantage, workers' buy-in/commitment and psycho-wellbeing is non-negotiable either.

## **8. Limitation**

As this study was based on cross-sectional data, longitudinal survey could be applied in the future to determine trends and causation. Future studies should include other predictor dimensions for new normal (such as training, job characteristics, engagement, rewards, and organizational culture) and extend their studies to other sectors and climes to expand the sustenance of competitive advantage.



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EBI 2: Based on the level of adaptation to new operational techniques by my institution in this pandemic: I would recommend my university as a great place to work

1	2	3	4	5	6
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

EBI 3: Based on the level of adaptation to new operational techniques by my institution in this pandemic: I rarely think about looking for a job at another university

1	2	3	4	5	6
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

EBI 4: Based on the level of adaptation to new operational techniques by my institution in this pandemic: I see myself still working at my university in two years' time

1	2	3	4	5	6
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

EBI 5: Based on the level of adaptation to new operational techniques by my institution in this pandemic: I work beyond what I would if in a similar role elsewhere

1	2	3	4	5	6
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Competitive Advantage 1: In the last 2 years (2019-2020), my institution is first to introduce new unique services in academia market

1	2	3	4	5	6
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Competitive Advantage 2: In the last 2 years (2019-2020), my institution prioritized numbers over persons

1	2	3	4	5	6
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Competitive Advantage 3: In the last 2 years (2019-2020), my institution outsourced some activities

1	2	3	4	5	6
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Competitive Advantage 4: In the last 2 years (2019-2020) my institution offered prices as low as or lower than rivals

1	2	3	4	5	6
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Competitive Advantage 6: In the last 2 years (2019-2020), my institution developed a strong brand name



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1	2	3	4	5	6
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Competitive Advantage 7: In the last 2 years (2019-2020), my institution provided dependable delivery of academic programs

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1	2	3	4	5	6
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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## Appendix 2

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R square	Std. error of the estimate
1	.730 <sup>a</sup>	.533	.529	.57507

a. Predictors: (Constant), employee buy-in, techno-pedagogical competency, psycho-wellbeing

ANOVA<sup>a</sup>

Model	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	120.213	3	40.071	121.166	.000 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	105.166	318	.331		
Total	225.379	321			

a. Dependent variable: Competitive advantage

b. Predictors: (Constant), employee buy-in, techno-pedagogical competency, psycho-wellbeing

Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.740	.235		3.147	.002
Techno-pedagogical competency	.140	.058	.116	2.430	.016
Psycho-wellbeing	.296	.048	.319	6.113	.000
Employee buy-in	.406	.051	.408	8.044	.000

a. Dependent variable: Competitive advantage