

POSITIONING OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN PROMOTING HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UK

Dr. Mahua Biswas* Hassan Tariq Elise Mumbanga*****

**Senior Lecturer, London School of Science and Technology, United Kingdom.*

***Lecturer, London School of Science and Technology, United Kingdom.*

****Senior Lecturer, London School of Science and Technology, United Kingdom.*

Abstract

Community colleges have evolved significantly, becoming critical access points for higher education, for non-traditional and marginalised student populations. These institutions in the past have responded to the needs of society and the economy by providing access to affordable, flexible and vocationally relevant education provisions. Despite having achievements in teaching and enhancing social equality, they still struggle with certain problems such as lack of funds, stigma, and recognition compared to universities. This research paper aims to explore the positioning of community colleges in the context of higher education in the UK. The experience of participants either working or studying in the community colleges has been collected using a mixed-methods. The findings highlight the contribution of community colleges in the United Kingdom for a broader and more widely available quality higher education.

Keywords: *Higher education, Quality education, Inclusive education, community colleges, United Kingdom.*

Introduction

Community colleges have an important function when it comes to provision of higher education responsibilities, with specific reference to the United Kingdom (Nixon, 2020). Further Education (FE) as a term is used in the context of these institutions within the United Kingdom, and they enrol students from any age ranging from those who have completed their secondary education, to adults who want to improve their employment positions or change their careers. There are normally wide opportunities offered by community colleges; vocational, Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND), and transfer to universities (Elfert, 2019).

Community colleges are not just centres of learning but are powerful entities that develop workforces and ensure their courses match employment opportunities. Today, community college plays a huge role in social mobility and economic growth (Kisker et al., 2023). Thus, inclusiveness is even more important, bearing in mind that they provide opportunity to pursue educational courses at an esteemed university which can sometimes be limited due to financial causes.

The System – Community colleges throughout the UK total over 262 institutions and offer a diverse range of programs, courses including vocational in order to fulfil learners' needs. Free education for instance for students from 16-18 years also increases the participation in further education since it is reachable to most learners (Corbin & Thomas, 2023). Also, the fees for community college education are somewhat lower than in the traditional universities, which makes education accessible to students across the population. Apart from social equity, the structure fosters lifelong learning (Bowden et al., 2019).

Thus, community colleges remain essential pathways to achieving the college education and beyond with the features such as flexibility, shifter, options, personalized support, and diverse opportunity. They

enable learners to achieve academic and career aspirations, improve employment opportunities, as well as to bring about social mobility.

Historical Context of Community Colleges in the UK

Community college in the context of the UK dates back to the early part of the 20th century though developments started around the 1920s. Appointed as Secretary of Education for Cambridgeshire in 1922, Henry Morris introduced the idea of the village college which was meant to offer both primary general education and multiple community services for rural communities (Gardner, 2020). This resulted in start of multi-functional institutions of education which were also centres of social capital and learning, creating a lifelong learning community within the common populace.

These colleges took over decades to change its vocational and academic provisions where different vocations and academics could affordably seek higher education. There has been increased government policies as well as educational reforms in the UK that have greatly encouraged the development of community colleges. For example, the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 enabled colleges to offer higher education and offered new freedom to institutions (O'Banion, 2018). This legislation enabled a more effective link from further education to traditional universities as a result of it.

Besides the domestic policies, there are quite different models in the international community concerning the community colleges. The mission of community colleges in the United States is mainly to offer the first two years or vocational education at an affordable cost and to transfer students to senior institutions (Raby&Valeau, 2018). This model accommodates a diverse population, including non-traditional students, and aims at development of other relevant and transferable skills for the sake of employment. On the other hand, community colleges in the UK focus on vocational education and training that are within the context of further education services which may include, community service in order to address various needs (Compagnucci&Spigarelli, 2020).

Role of Community Colleges in Access to Higher Education

Community colleges are very central institutions in the provision of accessibility to higher education, given that they work towards increasing access and enrolment among a cross section of students. These institutions charge much lower fees than traditional universities, thus allowing different social strata of students to achieve their matriculation dreams and diplomas without borrowing hefty loans. Most community college learners attend evening or weekend classes because of their workplace commitments or family responsibilities. This flexibility is central for admission of non-conventional students who may have never attended college before (Alfadeel, 2023).

Besides scheduling, community colleges offer every financial assistance depending on the applicant, such as scholarships and grants to remove other financial hurdles. Though enlarging class sizes, community colleges help create a positive learning atmosphere to maximize student focused attention, contributing to their academic performance. Such an approach not only fosters social equity but also prepares students in the possession of skills that match the obtainable jobs within the regional economy macro environment to gain access to university education in an affordable manner.

As far as geographical distribution of community colleges is concerned, community colleges are situated such that it helps to achieve access within the existing urban and rural settings. These colleges enrol huge multitudes of students in urban areas which are capable of offering and delivering numerous vocational as well as academic programs that are in tandem with the employment needs of the areas. Good location as the result of which students can easily find a place for internship and also establish

contacts with various businesses and companies, which are extremely useful for gaining experience. In contrast, rural community college systems tackle issues of accessibility and taken into consideration of branches or out-station centres to encourage students in remote areas to seek education without having to relocate (Spencer et al., 2023). As these institutions develop compact communities of learners, they tend to be more focused on providing individualized learning experiences.

Reyes et al. (2018) show that the community college has been effective in closing learning deficits for diverse student populations. Birnbaum et al. (2022) highlighted that many entrants are coming to community colleges with low-income levels or who have not been in education for some time. This demographic diversity underscores the importance of community colleges in promoting higher education access for individuals who may otherwise be excluded from traditional university pathways.

Student Perspectives on Community Colleges in the UK

Exploring student's viewpoints about community college in the UK, empirical and qualitative research contributes much towards understanding satisfactoriness, experience, and perceptions towards educational quality. Lin & Gao, (2020) opined that students are happy with personalized attention and small classroom settings that makes up most community colleges. According to a survey that the Association of Colleges (AoC) carried out, over 80 per cent, of students in the survey said that they felt supported by tutors, and this was in harmony with their performance and satisfaction levels (VanWart et al., 2020).

Jepsen et al., (2014) reveal that students regard those community colleges as important ladders to the next levels and the first steps to the labor market. Furthermore, Stathopoulou et al., (2019) highlighted that the students' experience on programme quality is also positive as most of them pointed out that the programs had good reputation in preparing them to meet market demands and hence the reason, they get employment opportunities. Community colleges are known to cultivate good partnership with organizations thus facilitating curriculum integration that meets the market demands (Spencer et al., 2023).

Rawashdeh et al., (2021) opined that students recommend increased access to resources which complement students' educational experience including academic advising and career services. These services are viewed as a plus for the community college since within traditional university, students may not be able to access many services. Besides, the function of providing access to the senior levels of education, community colleges promote lifelong education and continuing education. They propose a variety of programs, which address the needs of the learners, who are adults; this allows people to gain new professions or improve their skills during their working years (Reyes et al., 2018).

Furthermore, community colleges create good employability and mobility amongst the students. These institutions are readily accessible and offer good services which are relatively cheap hence manageable by any student regardless of their financial status. Due to these aspects, graduates' employment chances within a job market increases, chances of getting better paid employment thus affects their social mobility status. Therefore, according to Huerta et al., (2022) research, community college attendees secured employment faster than their counterpart who had no further education training. The focus on the practical skills training corresponds to the new trend that increased interest to qualified personnel in many spheres and, thus, improves employment.

Impact of Community Colleges in Promoting Higher Education

The importance of some community colleges to serve as institution that provides opportunities for students to attend universities cannot be emphasized enough. A large number of post-secondary institutions already have articulation agreements with universities, which make their students' transition easier once they have obtained their associates degrees (Stathopoulou et al., 2019). This helps a student to transfer credits easily and thus enabling one, which is less time consuming and cheaper exercise to achieve a bachelor's degree. Most community colleges offer starting courses in different fields that prepare learners for further study.

Besides, participation in the credit transfer initiative, community colleges play a central role in promoting further education and life-long kind of education. They provide courses that are suitable for learners of all classes including working adult students who would wish to promote their careers or even change fields (Birnbaum et al., 2022). This adaptability not only improves the overall personal growth of a learner but also contribute positively to the economic sector by producing qualified human resource. Due to increased job market dynamism, culture of learning enables community colleges to produce citizens who meet the market demands of various careers (Bowden et al., 2019).

Furthermore, there is evidence of how community college affects students' lives and their abilities to find employment and improve the overall socioeconomic status of their families. The institutions offer lower fees that enable students to meet their educational dreams, a hurdle most students face due to the cost of education (Lin & Gao, 2020). To reiterate, community college graduates report better employment status and wages than before, mainly leading to a better status in society. This impact is most felt for low-income learners because traditional university learning may be financially out of reach for them.

Practical skills training and its realignment with community college students needs and the available employment opportunities in the region are another way that community colleges affect those they come into contact with (Liguori et al., 2019). Institutions of higher learnings have established a strong relationship with employers in the area to facilitate that their curriculum is well calibrated to meet the employer's needs. Local community colleges in areas that experience growth in technology industries will likely create an emphasis on coding, data analysis, and many more (Reyes et al., 2018). This co-relationship not only assist students to get placement from industry but also helps in boosting up local economy which provides talented candidate to the employer's industry.

Challenges Faced by Community Colleges in the UK

Community colleges in the UK have several drawbacks that hamper their ability to lead the way in increasing access to higher education. The first is funding, under which the country struggles to come up with adequate funds for purposes of financing development projects (Kisker et al., 2023). In today's environment it is even more difficult for community college to secure its funds because the government is cutting down its financial contribution and students enrolment credit hours differ from semester to semester. Consequently, they might not be in a position to deliver a variety of programs, or provide for vital services and equipment. Such a situation in financial terms can produce staffing problems which have a bearing on the quality of education and the support that students receive.

Similarly, community colleges are commonly regarded as substandard institutions compared to traditional colleges and Universities. Such perception may make potential students especially from the upper class pull out because they believe that community colleges are substandard. And it is in this regard that efforts to address this stigma are vital in fostering a recruiting drive for the right crop of

students, especially one that will diversify the clientele base' of the community colleges along with the need to promote the value of the education offered at such institutions (Elfert, 2019).

Another major issue is the practical problem of getting the message out to citizens about the availability of job opportunities from community college education (Kisker et al., 2023). Most people still do not know what programs are available or what could be gained when a person registers in a community college. This has left gaps that need to be filled through targeted marketing campaigns, community engagement initiatives and organizational partnerships with local organizations.

Further, the increasing tempo of technology development and fluctuations in the employment environment raises a number of questions for community colleges based on the teaching and learning activities (Elfert, 2019). Due to this, these institutions have to transform the programs and course they offer in order to capture the new market of students and employers. This requires continued interaction with industries, so as to obtain their input on the training needs of the current workforce.

Research Gap

Despite progressive work accomplished in terms of community colleges' contribution to advancement of higher education, several areas of the literature are still open. Firstly, it is evident that there is comparatively little research literature concerning post-1992 characteristic non-traditional learners, including adults or those returning to education. He added that learning program facilitators 'peculiar difficulties can be valuable in examining modifications for programs and support services (Jepsen et al., 2014; Lin & Gao, 2020; Van Wart et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, other research has to be conducted to determine whether the education received in the community college affects graduates' employability and social mobility in the long term. However more research needs to be done for the focus to be on the longitudinal results noting how community college education impacts the lives of people (Huerta et al., 2022; Rawashdeh et al., 2021).

Last, but perhaps most significant, studies by Liguori et al., (2019); Rawashdeh et al., (2021) have investigated the extent of success in recruiting underrepresented populations to sample designs employed in the studies. Exploring best practices of community college recruitment from success stories gives direction on how the enrolment of the community colleges to be boosted as well as the value of community education.

Methodology

The study was conducted to assess the impact of community colleges in promoting higher education in the UK. This study is explanatory in nature. We gathered data from two groups – administrative staff and students at two community-based colleges in the United Kingdom. The administrative group included lecturers, middle managers, academic tutors, student support officers etc. The student group consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students from business management, health science, teaching education, and criminology departments, DET etc.

To accumulate qualitative data from administrative group, online individual in-depth interviews utilising tools such as MS team has been used. The semi-structured interview focusing the discussion of reasons for selecting a community college, opinions regarding access and equity, perception about the quality of courses offered, experiences related to social mobility, career prospects, difficulties faced, and the impact of attending community college overall. Data collected from 10 participants from this group. Thematic analysis has been used to analyse the qualitative data.

To acquire data from the students group, a questionnaire was distributed to approximately 250 students via email and printed copies using simple random sampling. Initially, we received 155 responses. After the data cleaning, we could retain only 148 responses for the analysis. Open ended and Liker scale ranging from “Strongly agree” to “Strongly Disagree” have been used to collect data on the selected variables. Amos and SPSS 26 has been used to analyse the data. This study is governed by ethical procedures where all participants give consent after a comprehensive explanation of the purpose of the study, the procedure, and their participant rights.

Thematic Analysis

The interviews concentrated on the historical development of community colleges in the UK, impact of community colleges in HE, challenges faced by them and recommendations. The key findings of the qualitative analysis are tabulated below:

Theme Key Insights Supporting Quotes

Development of Community Colleges in the UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community colleges emerged in the mid-20th century to provide accessible education for those unable to attend traditional universities. - Government policies have shaped their growth, student demographics, and curriculum. - These institutions serve as a bridge to higher education for non-traditional students. 	<p>“Community colleges were founded to give education access to people who could not finance or access traditional universities.” – Participant 3</p> <p>“The government saw the need for widening participation into higher education from the '60s and '70s.” – Participant 7</p> <p>“There were so many people like me who didn’t take the normal route to university, and community colleges were a lifeline.” – Participant 5</p>
Impact of Community Colleges in Promoting Higher Education Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community colleges increase access to higher education, especially for disadvantaged groups. - They provide an academic stepping stone for students to transition into university. - They offer flexible learning options suited for working adults and non-traditional learners. 	<p>“Community colleges have allowed people to break through the barriers to education.” – Participant 1</p> <p>“For many students, particularly mature learners or those from disadvantaged backgrounds, community colleges provide a pathway to the university.” – Participant 3</p> <p>“I was not sure if university was for me, but my time at the community college gave me the skills and motivation to continue.” – Participant 9</p>
Challenges Faced by Community Colleges in the UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Budget cuts reduce course offerings and essential student services. - High dropout rates due to competing demands (work, family, study). 	<p>“Budget cuts directly impact our ability to provide essential courses and services.” – Participant 2</p> <p>“Balancing work, family, and study makes it difficult for students to stay engaged.” –</p>

	- Lack of government and institutional recognition limits funding and development.	Participant 5 “Community colleges are often overlooked in education policies that favour universities.” – Participant 4
Need for Policy and Structural Support	- Additional funding is necessary to maintain and improve community colleges. - Greater recognition from policymakers would help expand their role in higher education. - More student support services (e.g., counseling, career guidance) are needed.	“We are under-resourced when it comes to providing counselling, career guidance, and mental health support.” – Participant 6 “Limited recognition and funding have restricted community colleges' ability to evolve.” – Participant 10

The findings of this research present a nuanced approach to the role, impact, and difficulties confronted by UK community colleges. This research highlights participants' views of the historical development of the community college, shaped by changing educational policy, new societal needs, a changing job market and economic climate, and the changing roles of community colleges themselves. As emphasised by Gardner (2020), community colleges have served an important function of enabling flexible and cost-effective entry to higher education for nontraditional students. However, limited recognition and funding have limited their capacity to evolve with the demands of society.

However, there are still many challenges, notably about funding, student engagement and recognition. Participants describe the two most pressing issues as limited resources and shrinking budgets. The result has been cuts in courses, services and student supports that are integral to the success of students. The lack of governmental and institutional recognition is also a barrier to community colleges and it is hard for them to compete with larger universities on prestige and resources (Kisker et al., 2023). In addition, the challenges of high dropout rates and poor student engagement (particularly for non-traditional age students) create additional challenges. Community colleges, while tremendously important in making education inclusive and accessible, are constrained enormously by their own financial, institutional and structural limitations (Elfert, 2019). Understanding these issues will be essential for having an impact on the UK's higher education landscape.

Analysis and Findings

The following sections provide students' perspective and the determinants for choosing community colleges over traditional institutions.

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics summarise data for Age Group, Gender, Ethnicity, and First generation of education from a sample of 148 student participants, with no missing values. Age is divided into groups based on logical or research-relevant ranges, often reflecting life stages or educational contexts. For example, groups might be: less than 25 years (young adults, typical college age), 25–30 years (working adults or career changers), and 30+ years (mature students) 35+ (wants to pursue education after a break in studies or lifelong learners). The Age Group variable indicate most of the participants belongs to age group 35+ 70.9% (Age group 35-40- 31.1%, 40-45 18.9%, 45 above 20.9%). This indicates majority of

the demographic of community colleges in the UK are from upper age group and who has crossed the typical college/university goers age.

For Gender, 38.5% is male and 61.5% is female suggesting that the majority of community college goers are female.

The collected data also shows a diverse mix of backgrounds, the largest group of students are British Black/Black making up 30.4% of the sample, White British accounting for 21.6%, Asian/Asian British make up 23.6%, European represent 14.2% and others constitute 10.2% of the sample. This dataset suggesting the community college goers are a mix of ethnic backgrounds.

The survey data also revealed that 86.5% are the first generation students suggesting a dominant category. Overall, the data reveals limited diversity in gender and first generation students but diversity in ethnicity and a focus on a specific age category.

Table I: KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.806
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	758.757
	Df	78
	Sig.	.000

Source: Authors' calculation

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin is 0.806, indicating that the sample size was adequate for factor analysis. Additionally, Bartlett's test of sphericity was also found to be significant ($p = 0.000$), confirming that the data was suitable for factor analysis. It is generally assumed that if the KMO value exceeds 0.6 and Bartlett's test is significant, the data is appropriate for further analysis (Dragan and Topolšek, 2014).

We used Principal component analysis to identify the latent variables in our instrumental data. When applying the Promax with Kaiser Normalization rotation method, three factors have been identified (Appendix-Table III) which constitute 62% of the total variance (Appendix-Table IV). Social and Financial (SFIN) factor is a very reliable indicator of choice of the college and significantly influence educational outcomes (Aslan, 2017). Accessibility and Equity (AE) is the second factor identified. Students from low-socioeconomic groups mostly targets community colleges as this helps in terms of assurance for equal opportunities (Rodeiro and Macinska, 2022). Quality learning is another factor which is identified as the third factor.

Table II: Reliability and Convergent Validity

Parameters	CR	AVE	Cronbach Alpha
SFIN	0.9146	0.65091	0.831
AE	0.78955	0.65997	0.707
QL	0.87834	0.59194	0.83

Source: Authors' calculation

Table II presents Cronbach's Alpha (CA), Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct. All factor loadings exceed the established thresholds, supporting the constructs' convergent validity. The values for Cronbach's Alpha are above 0.7 for all constructs, indicating good internal consistency. The AVE and the CR values exceed the minimum requirement of 0.5 and 0.6, confirming the reliability and validity of the data ((Dragan and Topolšek, 2014).

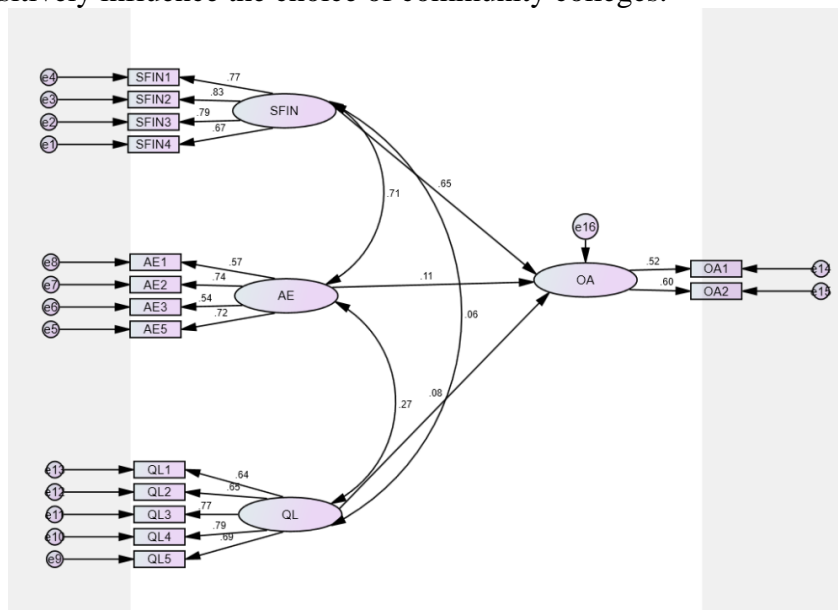
To understand the reasons for choosing community colleges over other universities, we identified three constructs viz., Social and Financial Impact(Aslan, 2017); Accessibility and Equity (Vidal Rodeiro and Macinska, nd), Quality learningbased on the factor loadings.

The Hypotheses Are:

H01: SFIN would positively influence the choice of community colleges.

H02: AE would positively influence the choice of community colleges.

H03: QL would positively influence the choice of community colleges.



The proposed hypotheses were tested using path analysis in AMOS, employing resample bootstrap at 95 confidence interval. The analysis showed a good structural model fit: $\chi^2=117.280, df=84, p=0.10$. A non-significant p-value ($p>0.05$) suggests that the model fits the data well (Dragan and Topolšek, 2014). The CMIN/DF (1.396) is below 2, indicating a good fit. CFI = 0.952, IFI = 0.953, TLI = 0.939, RMSEA = 0.054 and the Pclose = 0.382. All the parameters appear above threshold and well-fitting for the data (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

The analysis showed that SFIN have a positive and direct impact on the OA choice of community colleges ($\beta=0.65, p=0.003$). Accessibility and Equity (AE) also shows a positive but weak effect on the OA choice of community colleges ($\beta=0.101, p=0.001$) while QL (quality of learning) does not significantly impact OA ($\beta=0.08, p=0.526$). Hence we accept the H01 and H02, however reject H03.

Also, the VIF values for SFIN, AE and QL are 1.690 and 1.658 1.580, respectively. This confirms that there are no concerns for multicollinearity.

Conclusion

The findings revealed that community colleges have evolved significantly, becoming critical access points for higher education, for non-traditional and marginalised student populations. The result of the SEM suggest that accessibility and financial support for the course are important determinants, whereas quality of learning is not as important as others parameters so far as the students are concerned. The philosophy of qualitative interviews identified the positive change that community colleges brought to the lives of the students who would otherwise not be privileged to attend college. Many participants

complimented on the attentiveness and focus on the community aspect that enhances engagement and belongingness. However, these insights coupled with statistical findings highlight the gap between perceived and actual outcomes prompting effective institutional approaches to students changing needs. The education system of the United Kingdom has placed community colleges in a strategic role of closing gaps in access, equity, and workforce development, but structural and systemic barriers still remain a concern as highlighted in this research. These challenges call on policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to guarantee that community colleges have sufficient resources, visibility, and authority to fulfil their mission. The future of community colleges, depends on their capacity to respond to future social demands while remain committed to their mission, vision and goals of serving the underprivileged and disadvantaged groups. These institutions can still play their parts in social mobility and educational equality, provided they adapt to current best practices and align with better collaborations.

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Appendix

Table III: Pattern Matrixa			
	Component		
	1	2	3
SFIN_Q9A		.775	
SFIN_Q9B		.830	
SFIN_Q9C		.791	
SFIN_Q9D		.670	
AE_Q7A			.565
AE_Q7B			.735
AE_Q7C			.902
AE_Q7E			.721
QL_8A	.693		
QL_8B	.650		
QL_8C	.771		
QL_8D	.790		
QL_8E	.689		
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.			
a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.			
Table IV: Total Variance Explained			

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	4.149	31.912	31.912	4.149	31.912	31.912	3.138
2	2.856	21.967	53.879	2.856	21.967	53.879	3.457
3	1.148	8.828	62.707	1.148	8.828	62.707	3.081
4	.783	6.022	68.729				
5	.698	5.373	74.102				
6	.605	4.654	78.756				
7	.561	4.318	83.074				
8	.519	3.993	87.067				
9	.454	3.490	90.557				
10	.381	2.928	93.484				
11	.371	2.852	96.336				
12	.248	1.909	98.245				
	.228	1.755	100.000				
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.							
a. When components are correlated, sums of squared loadings cannot be added to obtain a total variance.							