

A Perspective on Online Degrees Vs. Face-to-Face in the Academic Field.

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Abstract

Lifelong learning is being promoted actively by outreach and initiatives like distance education through world campuses or online courses has been used as an effective tool worldwide. The recent efforts of outreach is online and distance learning programs which are gaining increasing importance among working professionals as well as students who want to do multiple courses or work simultaneously. This study examines the acceptance of online doctoral degrees in hiring scenarios. It seeks to find out the importance and preference given by employers to candidates who have an online degree.

It focuses on defining factors which are crucial to the design of online instruction that may improve the acceptability by stakeholders of degrees earned in online programs. For present purposes, such programs are defined as those in which students can obtain a degree either totally or partially online. The questions in the current research are intended to uncover information on why university degrees, earned in this way, are not perceived as equivalent to degrees earn in residential programs by hiring gatekeepers in a university setting.

1. Introduction

It is clear that online degree occupies a very important area of education because of the acceleration in communication technology and high demand on such degree by full time employee. However, on-campus degrees are still preferable by the employers for many reasons such as the residency in the school, interaction among students, interactions between students and instructors, in addition to the accessible resources that could be in the learners' hands any time. Learning for many employers, especially a full time graduate degree is more valuable over an online graduate degree. Employers have raised their concerns and objections for online degrees. By discovering the importance of these objections, course developers and instructional designers may be able to apply this information in ways that can alleviate those concerns. If that can be done, it may raise the perceived quality of online degrees earned by applicants to that of their traditional counterparts. Therefore, this study was designed to provide insight to "what counts" and to understand which instructional features affect the acceptability of online degrees in order to guide the future development of distance learning systems. Online Degree is preferred but yet it doesn't drive a higher salary package. Balancing between family, work, and education is so hard in many aspects. Many people nowadays are seeking online degree to overcome such hardship. But many employers don't even count online degrees as a part of educational experience. These internal and external conflicts cause many people to think twice before pursuing an online degree. It's suitable for some as it meets their needs; it's attractive because of its flexibility component and the balancing idea between family, work, and education, yet many people fear to take it up because of employers not seeing an added value to it.

2. Research Question

As indicated, the purpose of this paper is to examine the acceptance of doctoral online degree in hiring scenarios. Therefore, two research questions were developed for the purpose of this study.

RQ1: Which factors are most important to the acceptability of online degrees in the eyes of hiring decision-makers in the field of academe?

RQ2: What can be done by the hiring decision-makers in the Academe to improve online degrees?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Outreach & Online Education - One of the key initiatives of outreach has been promotion of higher education and its accessibility to one and all through distance learning or online teaching modes. Many reputed schools own world campus which caters to the needs of thousands of students across the globe. Some estimations show that online education has expanded at a rate that is more than 10 times the growth of the general postsecondary market (Allen & Seaman, 2005). Thus, there are millions of students who complete online college courses these days. Increased access to a higher education in this form has allowed people living in rural areas, working professionals, military personnel in distant locations, and single parents with busy schedules to earn college credits (Grenzky & Maitland, 2001). Many students have also taken advantage of online classes as it allows flexible scheduling. For example, many colleges and universities have reported that residential students seeking to increase their course load account for a substantial portion of those enrolled in their online sections (Carnevale & Olsen, 2003). The demand for online course has infused competition for new enrollments and thus has led the virtual institutions to expand both the number of degree programs and the number of graduate degrees that they award. For example, doctoral programs delivered online can be managed by students whose life circumstances prevent them from attending on-campus classes in the traditional way. Thus, the flexibility and convenience of distance learning serves their needs. However the question arises that when these online doctoral students try finding jobs are their degrees given equal importance as compared to a full time doctoral students of any university.

3.2 Current Scenario of Doctoral Programs in USA-There has been a steady increase in the doctoral programs in the United States over the years and with lifelong learning becoming the magic mantra of this knowledge age, it is expected to grow even further in the future. In 2004, the number of doctoral degrees awarded by research institutions totaled 42,155, the largest number of degrees ever awarded in a single academic year (Hoffer et al, 2004). As these trends continue, the U.S. Department of education projects that the number of doctoral degrees conferred will rise by 21% by 2015 (Hauser & Bailey, 2006). Half of all new doctoral graduates are expected to seek academic employment - with life sciences, social sciences, and education representing approximately 49% of the disciplines involved (Facts in brief, 2001). To fill this growing need, many institutions are moving to mirror residential coursework with online versions, or to create new degree programs that are offered entirely online. (Carnevale, 2005).

In summary, the number of graduate programs that are offered completely online is growing to meet the growing number of students and increasing need for new faculty. The strong demand is supported by research that favorably compares educational outcomes of online and residential programs. For example, many studies demonstrate student satisfaction, achievement and learning outcomes that are on par with residential programs (Bernard, Abrami, & Lou, et al.,

2004). Degree.net, a web-based service that reviews online courses of study, lists dozens of accredited doctoral programs offered by U.S. based for-profit, as well as online programs offered by nonprofit institutions (Bears & Bears, 2006). Online degree programs are even appearing in America's Best Graduate Schools published by U.S. News & World Report, which lists seven online doctoral programs in education alone. While none of the for-profit distance education programs offered by virtual institutions are accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), each has a form of accreditation that enables these institutions to advertise in direct competition with residential programs (Blumenstyk, 2003).

3.3 Online Degrees and their Acceptability-There is no question that online degree programs are a substantial part of today's higher educational system. Online distance education courses offer a convenient way for millions of degree-seeking students who are otherwise unable to attend classes in a residential setting to continue their studies. While controversial, research appears to have demonstrated that a degree earned online is in many ways similar to one earned in traditional settings. For example, online courses often have higher dropout rates (Carr, 2000; Jensen, 2001), but successful students tend to indicate that they are "equally or more satisfied" with their courses when compared to those in "traditional" instructional settings (MacFarland, 1999; Sikora, 2003).

Not every student is successful with their coursework, and variations in success in an online course may be attributable to a student's age, learning style, and motivation (Dyrud, 2000; Diaz, 2002). This may explain why a number of students have migrated back to the classroom, where they simply feel more comfortable receiving their instruction "live" (Guernsey, 1998). Studies that examine no significant difference in test-score achievement (Russell 1999; Gagne & Shepherd, 2001) or retention (Bernard et al., 2004) have inherent flaws because students participating in many of these studies have selected the learning environment that they prefer. In other words, retention or achievement as units of measure are controversial in that they do not create a clear picture of whether online instruction is effective because other factors (such as learning style) cannot be easily taken into account using these methods.

A new area of research (which research?, Needs citation), however, has raised the question concerning the acceptability of degrees that have been earned solely or partly online. The purpose of this new area of research has been to investigate whether distance learning and traditional degrees are equal in the eyes of "gatekeepers" in different situations - those who review the credentials of applicants for various kinds of openings. These studies are not concerned with why students chose to enroll; neither are they concerned with comparing educational outcomes nor with evaluating the educational merits of distance learning. The question that these studies are concerned with has been whether gatekeepers see online degrees as having the same value for their purposes as a degree earned in a traditional residential

program. The results suggest that those who hold online degrees, or whose records include a significant amount of online coursework in their curriculum of studies, are not judged as having qualifications that are equal to those of graduates who earn their degrees in a residential program.

The concept of acceptability has been studied in several recent research settings. These include the following: using credits earned online as a credential when applying to a university graduate program (DeFleur & Adams 2004)¹, applying for a job in a business hiring situation with a bachelor's degree earned wholly or partially online (Adams & DeFleur, 2006)², seeking employment in a university faculty position (Adams & DeFleur, 2005)³, and seeking employment in the health professions (Adams, DeFleur, & Heald, 2007)⁴. In each of these studies, gatekeeper- respondents were asked to choose between candidates whose qualifications differed only in terms of whether they earned their credits online or in a traditional residential program. A more recent national survey of health hiring practices shows a remarkable consistency with the previous studies, with both quantitative and qualitative analyses yielding similar results. Only 6% of health profession employers indicated a willingness to hire an applicant with an online degree and only fifteen percent would accept an applicant with half of his or her courses earned online (Adams, DeFleur & Heald, 2007). Some respondents pointed out that online courses are more acceptable for training, certificates, and undergraduate classes, but not for graduate classes. Many comments indicated that interaction with professors and peers as being an essential part of an education and that these skills can only be gained by attending classes in a traditional setting.

This study continues a line of research regarding the acceptability of degrees earned wholly (or partially) online by evaluating the importance of those factors that negatively affect the perceived value of online degrees. While online degree programs represent a valuable educational opportunity for millions of people, permitting many to attend college - growing body of research reveals clearly that employers and university administrators regard traditional degrees as being far more preferable. A great deal of research has been conducted to compare online and traditional course work but little attention has been devoted to what happens to graduates of online programs when seeking to make use of their credentials. These findings have implications for students enrolled in online distance education degree programs, instructional developers and university administrators who manage continuing education programs.

4. Findings

The findings thus so far seem to suggest that in part, the perception of face-to-face contact with instructors and mentoring are an important key to what many would consider a

"quality" education. While the reputation of a university for academic rigor is also associated with acceptability, traditional classroom experiences are perceived to offer something more. It may be suggested that online programs, even those offered by institutions noted for excellent academic standards may always be regarded as "missing" key elements.

In summary, then, more research is needed in the area of distance learning and acceptability from the perspective of a potential employer. Further, online distance learning is an established method of delivery, and yet research in this critical area seems to be lagging. Experimentation with innovative technologies appears to be constrained by the institutionalization of content management systems and relying on faculty to work with complex digital media tools to develop innovative models for the delivery of instruction. Future research projects might focus on a more detailed examination of potential curricular solutions including;

1. Additional comparison studies to evaluate whether hybrid or blended learning satisfies the perception that classroom experiences, working with professors, and interaction are "missing." Some research appears to show that this method of distance learning has advantages in that hybrid classes include some face-to-face interaction. For example, hybrid classes are typically designed to offer online course materials, online interaction with teachers and students, and occasional face-to-face classroom based sessions (Delialioglu, 2005). Comparison studies suggest that student achievement rates and satisfaction rates are higher in hybrid courses that focus on study skills (Tuckman, 2002), computer sciences (Lilja, 2001) and in pure sciences (Persin, 2002). While these results seem impressive, the body of comparison studies that evaluate these delivery systems is limited.

2. The overwhelming majority of online, distance learning courses is structured around content management systems that employ text as the basis for all communication (Adams, 2006). The notion that some media is more effective than others or that they may enhance some learning activities is important to the acceptability debate. For example, advancements in streaming video technologies that allow synchronous communication (i.e., visual, verbal, and text) between a group of students and the professor have not been used extensively as a learning environment. While these technologies advance quickly, new models of online learning have been slower to appear. Perhaps new models using holographic projection systems coupled with rich internet applications will change the perception that face-to-face communication is "missing." In short, the perception of academic honesty, social presence, and the validity of degrees earned at a distance from a gatekeeper perspective should be more influential in the development of emerging educational technologies.

3. Finally, perhaps computer guided instruction may offer new approaches to online distance education. As Seymore Paperi (1980) pointed out, computers have the potential to be

more than a conduit for instructional materials. This line of thinking has been advanced by Cobb (1997), who suggested that a computer is part of the learning process - not simply a means for delivering content (Mietimeli, Nokelainen, Kurhila, Silander, & Tirri, 2005). For example, computers can be programmed to assist learners by responding to their actions, perhaps by automatically selecting or sequencing content. When coupled with databases, programmed lessons can adapt and alter lessons by drawing on a network of resources. In this type of instructional system, each lesson is different - shaped by student test scores, their pacing, or by level of difficulty. The result is a knowledge-based tutor that adapts to, and interacts with students. This approach to online courseware represents a fundamental shift away from content management systems toward a holistic approach of instructional systems design.

5. Conclusion

The study thus reveals that even though online degrees are increasing importance yet they have the following objections attached when finding the right job:-

- (a) Face-to-face classroom experience,
- (b) Reputation of institution for rigor, and
- (c) Mentored learning experiences

These are the stumbling blocks for online degrees to be perceived as being as acceptable as traditional degrees. These findings may provide an important perspective on the difficult issue of how to design new approaches to distance education that will improve the acceptability of course and degree offerings.

6. Limitations of the Study

The present study just looks into the general idea of acceptability of online doctoral degrees. It has some personal thoughts and experiences linked with existing literature review. Both qualitative and quantitative data is required to back up specific studies in this field of research.

7. Implications and Future Researches

For the purpose of distance education, in general, and master and doctoral degree in specific to be acceptable by employers in academic and business and industry fields, distance education should provide activities, games and simulations. Moreover, by activating and facilitating the advanced technology in virtual learning, the issue of interaction and

communication between the instructor and the learners will be partially overcome. Online instruction should follow the face-to-face method in terms of lesson plan preparation, lesson execution, and pre, constructive, and informative evaluation that should be occurred to improve the entire elements of learning.

Areas of research could be to find out whether acceptability issue is only with few disciplines or is consistent for all fields. . Future researchers can also look into aspects like how this trend varies or is consistent across other cultures and global academia as a whole .Does this hold true for other cultures and global academia as well could be another field of study

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