

EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper describes and assesses the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary studies pertaining to the employers' perceptions of online education. The results indicate that there is a much greater likelihood that a candidate with an online degree would be viewed less favorably for employment purposes compared to the candidate with the face-to-face degree. The paper identifies the gaps in the current studies and suggests future research directions regarding this critical topic.

Introduction

The continuously increasing enrolment of students in online courses and programs necessitates a closer look at the perceived value of online education especially as it pertains to the employers' perspective. Specifically, Allen and Seaman (2010) indicate that as of fall 2009 approximately 5.6 million higher education students were enrolled in at least one online course in the USA alone, a figure that represents an annual growth rate of 21%. Allen and Seaman further report that the growth rate for face-to-face courses in higher education is 2% and that the recent economic downturn has resulted in an increased demand for online courses and programs for about the majority (approximately 75%) of the institutions that were surveyed. Given the above figures, it is expected that the number of graduates with online degrees will continue to increase over the next few years.

The expected proliferation of graduates with online degrees has two major implications for the employers. First, the potential applicant pool based on which hiring decisions will be made will include a progressively increased percentage of applicants who have completed their degrees online. At the same time, employers are more likely to use the accessibility of online courses to their advantage for employee training and development purposes (Linardopoulos, 2010). Accordingly, employers are considered key stakeholders in online education and their viewpoint should be carefully considered during the development of new online programs and courses.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to conduct a review of existing studies and articles regarding the employers' perceptions of online education, identify gaps in the current literature and suggest future research directions regarding the employer perspectives on online education.

Specifically, this paper attempts to address the following main questions:

- How do employers perceive the value of online courses and degrees?
- Has the employers' perception of value of online courses and degrees changed as online educational offerings increased?
- What are the variables that affect the perception of the value of online education from the perspective of the employers?

Methodology

In order to review the findings of the current studies regarding the employers' perceptions of online education, a search was conducted on the *ERIC* and *ProQuest* research databases between January and February, 2011. The following key words were used during the search:

- online degrees and employers
- online degrees and employment
- employers' perceptions of online degrees
- employment prospects and online degrees

The search results on the above listed databases were limited to include only scholarly/peer reviewed journals. In addition, the search was restricted to articles published after 2008 in order to ensure the currency of the information included in the findings. However, three studies conducted between 2005 and 2007 were also used because they represented the first comprehensive attempt to research the topic under examination (employers' perceptions of online education).

Furthermore, a general search was conducted on Google using the above referenced key words in order to obtain data on the employers' perspectives as depicted in the 'popular' articles (non-scholarly/peer reviewed). No restrictions were used during that search, but emphasis was again given to the articles published after 2008.

Results

The review of the studies listed above indicates a discrepancy between the employers' perception as depicted in the 'popular' publications and the majority of the findings of the peer reviewed/scholarly articles. According to Columbaro and Monaghan (2009), who conducted a comprehensive literature review on this topic, the majority of popular media and articles published on this topic present

online degrees as “viable options” though they offer information regarding the risk component associated with pursuing an online degree.

Of particular importance are the studies of Adams et al. (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008). The authors attempted to compare the applicants’ potential of getting hired based on whether their degree was obtained online or face to face or via a hybrid method. The studies focused in a number of disciplines and in almost all of the cases, the candidate with a traditional degree was more likely to be hired.

Specifically, in one of their earlier studies Adams and Defleur (2005) researched the employment chances of a faculty candidate who obtained their doctoral degree either entirely or partially online (hybrid delivery) compared to a faculty candidate who obtained their doctoral degree via the face-to-face delivery mode. The design of the study seems to make clear to the respondents (search committee chairs) that the candidates share the same qualifications based on all other factors (e.g., recommendations, course evaluations, publications) other than the mode of delivery through which the doctoral degree was obtained. It should be noted that the authors do not mention the degree to which doctoral students interacted with their supervisor (in either of the three deliver modes). The results of the study clearly indicate that the candidate with the doctorate obtained via the traditional mode of instruction had a much higher chance of being hired when compared to the candidate who completed the doctorate in a fully online or hybrid settings. Specifically, the faculty candidate with a fully online doctorate was the preferred choice of only 2% of the respondents whereas the faculty candidate with the hybrid doctorate was the preferred choice of only 11% of the respondents. Accordingly, Adams and Defleur warn doctoral students to think carefully prior to pursuing their doctorate degree in an online setting. However, the results of this study are not confirmed (at least in one setting) by the findings of Guendoo (2008), according to which a faculty candidate who obtained their doctoral degree online will not be at a disadvantage when it comes to getting hired by a community college. While the community college administrators who participated in Guendoo’s study did cite some concerns regarding the online degree, they also indicated that a potential faculty candidate will in no way be viewed more negatively simply due to the fact that the degree was obtained online.

In a follow-up study Adams (2008) looked at the factors contributing towards the reluctance of the hiring officers (Deans, academic directors, etc.) when it comes to hiring a faculty member with an online doctorate. Participants cited the following areas where the applicant who obtained the doctorate via an online program is perceived to be lacking when compared to the candidate with a degree that was obtained face to face: interactions (face to face), the reputation of the institution, and mentored learning experiences (defined as mentoring in research and teaching activities etc), which is a typical focus of a face-to-face program.

In a more comprehensive study, Adams et al. (2006) attempted to evaluate the general perceptions of hiring managers regarding the acceptability of online

degrees. Through a survey of potential employers the authors obtained both quantitative and qualitative data. The results clearly indicate that employers are much more reluctant to hire candidates with online degrees compared to candidates who obtained their degrees through face-to-face instruction. Specifically, 96% of the participants would hire the candidate who obtained the degree face to face. The qualitative comments of the hiring managers provide additional insight into why the employers perceive the degrees obtained online as inferior; primarily the chief concern is the perceived lack of interaction associated with the online degree.

In one other study, Adams et al. (2007) specifically assessed the hiring chances of a candidate with an online degree in health care professions. The results once again show that the applicant with a face-to-face degree has a better chance of being hired. Overall, according to Adams (2008), more than 95% of the “gatekeepers” in the health, business and academic industries view the traditional face-to-face degree as a more acceptable credential for employment.

Assuming that the overall view of employers towards online degrees has not changed in the last two years, it is important to explore what accounts for the apparent overwhelming preference of hiring candidates with degrees obtained face-to-face vs. online. According to Columbaro and Monaghan (2009), potential employers reported the following concerns pertaining to online degrees:

- not enough academic rigor
- not enough face-to-face interactions
- more risk for cheating
- relationship with diploma mills
- perceived lack of commitment (on the student’s end) due to not being willing to come to campus.

Columbaro and Monaghan (2009), further report the following variables based on which online degrees may be viewed more favorably from the employers:

- reputation/recognition of the institution offering the degree
- accreditation of the institution/program
- perception of online students being more self-directed and disciplined.

The review of the studies above did not reveal concrete evidence of a changing perception regarding the value of the online degree on behalf of the employers. However, there is anecdotal evidence according to which as more programs and course are offered online and more graduates who obtained their degrees online advance within their organization, the perception of online degrees being less credible as an employment credential will change (Linardopoulos, 2010).

Discussion

The results of this research review clearly indicate that employers continue to view candidates who obtained their degrees in a traditional face-to-face setting more favorably compared to the ones who completed their degree online (at least within the disciplines that were examined in the selected studies). However, the review also highlights instances where the candidate with the online degree may not be at a disadvantage on the sole basis of the delivery mode through which the degree was obtained. In this case a candidate's skills and the stature of the institution through which the degree was obtained are considered to be more important than the delivery mode.

In addition, it should be noted that the studies analyzed for this review have two significant limitations in terms of the data provided regarding the employers' perceptions of the online degree. First, while some of the studies report employer data regarding the perceptions of the online degree on specific industries this is not done on a comprehensive basis and therefore, only a few industries are represented (primarily academia and health care). Furthermore, the latest publication date of the studies from which data was obtained in order to develop this paper is 2008. This raises the question as to whether the employers' perceptions regarding online education that were reported in the selected studies (or their predecessors) are still accurate as of 2011.

A critical point of discussion that relates to the current perception of employers towards online education is the increased tuition reimbursement rate provided to the employees to complete online coursework. According to the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans, of the 94% of the companies who provide some form of education assistance plans, more than two-thirds include online and distance learning courses. This fact raises the question as to whether employers do indeed perceive the online delivery mode to be less effective or less credible.

Future Research Directions

The issues associated with the studies discussed above indicate the need for the development of a new research approach in order to more accurately identify and analyze the current employers' perspective on online education. This revised model should include the following components:

- A clear indication of the advantages and disadvantages of the online degree as perceived by the employers.
- A comprehensive report of the employers' perceptions of the online degree by specific industries.

- An examination of the tuition reimbursement rates provided by the employers for online courses and programs (in terms of amount, rationale, etc.).

Conclusion

Online education is expanding at an unprecedented rate. Consequently, it is expected that more candidates holding online degrees in the near future will seek employment and promotion. Therefore it is critical that the viewpoint of employers regarding the online delivery mode is identified and analyzed. Specifically, more research is needed in determining the variables that affect the employers' perception of the online degree. This is a particularly important point given the fact that many institutions do not in any way distinguish between the face-to-face and online programs and courses (e.g., in these cases no specific notation of the delivery mode through which the degree was obtained is noted in the students' transcript). This review is an attempt to provide the key variables that need to be considered for future studies in this area.

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