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Market Value of Distance Education: Are those thrown out Right Away?

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Abstract:

There has been a growing interest on the comparison of traditional and distance education effectiveness. A large body of studies suggest both kind of educational setting create similar outcomes in terms of student satisfaction and learning outcomes. However; gatekeepers' perceptions on the value of online degrees play an important role in the determination towards the market value of distance education diplomas. As such, this study aims to test gatekeepers' perception of distance education graduates and how those perceptions influence hiring decisions. In this respect; data gathered from SMEs and large scale organizations were tested as to identify whether which group of hypothetical job applicants; traditional, or distant were most welcome. Limitations and suggestions for future studies are also discussed.

Keywords: gatekeepers, hiring decisions, distance education

1. Introduction

The huge increase in the number of higher education institutions adding online courses to their curriculum and opening online diploma programs lead to a growing interest in the research examining the effectiveness of distance education. In this respect, scholars suggest there might be appropriate academic subjects and students preferring limited interaction with regard to learning styles; and those create a need for distance education (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). Even though knowledge webs, virtual communities, 3D virtual classrooms seem to enhance the weaknesses of online education (Dede, 1996), certain academic subjects and students' are still in demand for traditional classroom settings. E-learning defined as technology-based learning in which learning materials are delivered electronically to remote learners via a computer network, has low cost and flexibility thanks to the internet becoming the dominant force of delivering knowledge and information (Zhong et. al., 2004). Offering a self-paced learning environment, distance education creates opportunities for those who have jobs, families and responsibilities (Tucker, 2004). Besides its advantages, distance education has been criticized in terms of high drop-out rates, decreased student motivation, limited interaction with teachers and peers, feelings of isolation and diminished promotion of critical thinking skills (Galusha, 1997). As also many employers went from the traditional path to receive their degrees, they may feel that attending classes delivered on campus is more valuable and effective for growth (Seibold, 2007). In this respect, following section aims to present a literature survey about managerial perceptions towards distance education to shed light on the perceived value of online diplomas.

2. Theoretical Background

Studies comparing the outcomes of traditional and distance education suggest no significant differences exist among the student satisfaction levels and learning outcomes (Johnson et. al., 2000; Zhao et. al., tarihi yok). A meta-analytic study even indicates that distant students outperform their traditional counterparts in terms of final course grades (Shackar & Neumann, 2010). However, market value of distance education still remains as a debate; as the gatekeepers' perceptions play an important role in the hiring process of graduates. Gatekeeper is someone who stands between a job and the candidate; such as an human resources manager, department head or company owner (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009). As such, managerial attitudes must be considered in terms of enhancing the potential negative prestige distance education has; especially in comparison to traditional university education.

Before taking a peak on relevant research; it seems reasonable to clear that a college degree could be classified as being wholly earned online- referred as distance education or partially earned online- referred as hybrid education. Up to 29% of course content can be delivered online in traditional education, whereas in hybrid the percentage varies between 30% - 79%. In distance education, at least 80% of the courses and materials are delivered online (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009).

Adams & Fleur (2005) discuss whether distance education graduates "are the ones that get thrown right away" and if so, what are the reasons? In this respect, three hypothetical applicants holding a traditional, hybrid and distance education diploma were hypothetically constructed. Academic gatekeepers were asked to state their opinions and 98% chose the applicant with the traditional doctoral degree

for the faculty vacancy. The reasons were associated with education quality, class and teacher interaction, socialization and mentoring. As hybrid and distance education lack those characteristics, traditionally earned doctoral degrees were most welcome.

The study was repeated in the business setting in 2006, Adams & Fleur examined whether an applicant with an online degree has the same chance of being hired as someone with same capabilities but holding a traditional degree. A questionnaire with hypothetical candidates were designed and sent in response to job advertisements. Findings indicate that 96% of the gatekeepers did not find the applicant with a virtual degree as acceptable as the one with the traditional degree.

Adams (2008) conducted a third study on the acceptability of online degrees in faculty vacancies. As such, academic gatekeepers mostly chose the traditional doctoral degrees due to the factors of face-to-face classroom experience, reputation of institution for rigor, and mentored learning experiences. In this respect, market value of distance education seems highly questionable.

Erden & Tekarslan (2014) gathered data from 20 managers working in various sectors who have an impact on the hiring process of job applicants. Their findings indicate gatekeepers prefer applicants with traditional degrees (19 out of 20). Besides, factors associated with the preference of traditional degrees were found to be inline with previous research findings; such as education quality, gain of competencies, development of communication skills, personal growth and the importance of student-instructor interaction.

On the overall, relevant studies suggest that gatekeepers doubt the effectiveness of online diplomas due to concerns of distance education lacking rigor, lacking face-to-face interaction, having potential for academic dishonesty and including concerns about students' commitment to education, potential of not fostering sense of community, lacking of student-instructor and student-peer interaction (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009; Seibold, 1992).

In Turkey, 82 universities out of 183 deliver distance education programs (Uzaktan eğitim rehberi ; Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu, 2017). Hybrid education is known to be delivered in only one university with 11 programmes of 2-year degrees and 30 bachelor degree programs (Dinçer, n.d.). Additionally, as online master's programs could be supportive of traditional degrees and effect the career advancements in the employer organizations, we solely focused on traditional bachelor degrees and on line bachelor degrees to investigate whether a job applicant with an online degree or traditional degree would be more preferable from the perspective of managers. Acceptability of online degrees in hiring situations could be classified to be examined in academic, health and business settings. As such, we focus on business administration diplomas and business settings to answer the following questions:

- Research question 1: What are the reasons associated with the preference/avoidance of applicants with traditional diplomas?
- Research question 2: What are the reasons associated with the preference/avoidance of applicants with online diplomas?

The method and finding sections serve to answer those questions. In the discussion, the argument is built upon suggestions to improve the quality and prestige of distance education.

3. Method

Data is gathered in order to reach information that will represent the current ways of thinking about the preference or avoidance of job applicants with traditional and online degrees. As such, questionnaire form contains two sections. First section asks gatekeepers to choose among two job applicants with similar characteristics; except candidate A had a traditional diploma whereas candidate B had a distance education diploma. Both of the hypothetical candidates had a business administration diploma from a high reputation university with a GPA of 3.50 out of 4.00, their curriculum contained the same courses (accounting, finance, business law and economics), internship experience and foreign language level were also similar. The profiles were represented in a table; such that the participants selected one of candidates as if that candidate was appropriate for an interview, stated the reasons of their choice and stated the reasons why they didn't pick the other candidate. Last section includes questions about demographics such as age, sex, educational status and tenure.

Researchers visited 22 companies and conducted interviews with gatekeepers (the owner, manager, or HR personnel responsible for hiring decisions). Three questions determined whether the gatekeeper was appropriate for the interview. First question asks whether the gatekeepers participates in hiring decisions. Second question asks whether the company hires new graduates with no work experience and third questions asks whether the company hires candidates with business administration diploma. Questions were read by the researcher and answers were written and coded for each question. The process started at february, 2017 and ended in march 2017. Convenient sampling method was applied, as the company visits took time and interviews lasted nearly one hour.

Demographics were analyzed with SPSS 17 (statistical package for Social sciences) and content analysis was conducted for frequency of repeated answers in qualitative data. Findings are presented in the next section.

4. Results

Demographics: 22 companies participated in the research; 12 in production, 8 in marketing and 2 in consulting services. The largest company has 1100 employees and smallest has 8 employees (average number of employees 142, std. deviation 300). All of the companies hire new graduates with business administration diplomas. 10 managers and 12 owners, 4 females and 18 males (average age 45, std. dev. 10) average work life experience 23 years (std dev. 10 years), average tenure at the current company 13 years (std. dev. 10 years), 13 participants had a bachelor degree, 8 had a master degree and one participant had a Ph.D. degree. 18 out of 22 gatekeepers stated that promotion decisions among the personnel are positively effected with a distance education diploma whereas none of the companies had an employee with a distance education diploma. This finding is consistent with the result that all of the gatekeepers preferred the hypothetical candidate with the traditional degree.

- The reasons associated with the preference of the candidate with traditional university diploma:

8 participants stated they chose candidate A because this candidate had a real university education in a real university setting in a systematic educational system. Attending courses and active involvement in the lectures, the chance to apply knowledge and gaining practical experiences are other reasons associated with traditional university setting. 2 gatekeepers said that candidate A would be more disciplined, another 2 participants mentioned about the importance of social skills and 3 mentioned the importance of communication skills. One of the participants said “*I believe in university education*”, another one stated that “*This candidate had the chance to interact with lecturers and friends*”. As can be seen, it seems reasonable to group the factors in five categories: real university setting, involvement in lectures, disciplined education, communication and social skills.

➤ Why did none of the gatekeepers pick candidate B who had a distance education diploma?

8 participants stated that candidate B had no real university education; one of them said “*The distance education process is ambiguous*”, another idea is “*This candidate didn’t actively attend lectures*”, another one said “*Maybe this candidate turned the computer on and didn’t even listen the lectures*”. This sentence highlights the concerns related with the integrity of distance education as two participants mentioned that this candidate had a diploma with no effort. 6 participants stated the lack of communication and social skills in the education, 3 highlighted that this candidate would be less disciplined. Absence of practical experience and applied lectures are other reasons mentioned by the participants. As can be seen; main points can be grouped as lack of a real university setting, lack of social and communication skills, lack of applied and practical knowledge, lack of integrity and discipline.

5. Discussion

Findings confirm previous study findings about the gatekeeper perceptions of online versus traditional education diplomas as discussed in the theoretical background section (see Adams & De Fleur 2006, 2008; Erden & Tekarslan, 2014). It seems that candidates with online education degrees are not perceived to be equals of those with traditional education degrees; even though hypothetical candidates would be asserted to have similar knowledge and skills.

In this study, we tried to create two hypothetical candidates that had the same curriculum of courses (i.e. finance, accounting management) characteristics (diploma from a highly reputable university) and skills with regard to selection criterion such as internships and foreign language. All qualities kept similar, only the nature of the degree traditional vs. online, seems to lead the decision of choosing to call the candidate with the traditional university degree for the job interview.

Curriculum vitae scanning before the actual job interview process is an essential component of the selection process; due to the fact that candidates will or will not be preferred for a face-to-face interview. In this study, we tried to identify whether gatekeepers will prefer to call for the candidate with the online degree or traditional business administration diploma, as this will give the start for the employment decision. Thus, based on the findings one cannot say that “gatekeepers prefer traditional university degrees over distance education”, as we did only ask whether which job applicant would be called for the job interview. In this respect, this study is a bit different than the rest.

Besides the slightly minimum difference mentioned in the previous paragraph, factors associated with the preference of the candidate (for the job interview) with the traditional university degree and avoidance of the candidate with the online degree is quite similar with the previous studies. First, gatekeepers stated that they believed in traditional education; because students actually visit the classrooms, receive education and take exams, that would make them gain discipline. Also there is less room for academic dishonesty and more room for peer-interaction, interaction with the lecturers is another asset for the students. Taken all together, gatekeepers used the word “real” for the traditional education and this real education would foster communication skills, social skills and create the chance to apply the theoretical knowledge more into practice.

None of the gatekeepers chose the hypothetical candidate with the online degree. In the absence of others with traditional university degrees, the decision might have differed. Additionally, distance education degrees could be an asset for employees to be considered in promotion decisions; but if only the employee is employed in the organization and has a traditional degree, already. Then, in this case, the distance education programmes could have been perceived to be valuable. From this point of view, distance education is not something that is completely avoided, but its value seems to be questionable when there are possible candidates with the traditional educational background. Reasons associated with the avoidance of the hypothetical candidate in the selection process is mainly that gatekeepers doubt whether the students really attended to lectures, whether the lectures create the chance to apply knowledge in practice, whether students receive discipline and lack academic honesty, or there is interaction with peers and instructors which would in turn foster communication and social skills.

Increasing growth in technology has been influencing the way people live. It is no doubt that technology has created a variety of opportunities to receive anywhere, any time university education. The socially demanding and stressful environments are able to minimize the time and energy that could be devoted to traditional education. Regardless of the changing life trends, this study and the previous study conducted by Erden and Tekarslan in 2014 point to the possibility that the nature of distance education is highly questionable from the perspective of gatekeepers. In order to minimize the doubts raised about the lack of discipline, interaction and academic honesty, and to increase the quality of the virtual environment to make it more possible with regard to fostering interaction and applied lectures, gatekeepers perceptions could be improved. Taken all together, the developing technology and changing perceptions among generations can improve the perceptions related with the value of virtual university settings. The promising finding about the values of distance education in promotion decisions sheds light on this possibility, as well.

The study has many limitations such as the small sample size, convenient sampling that does not give us the chance to generalize our findings, the mimic of the selection process with hypothetical candidates as this may not be reflecting the real behaviors in the selection process (but the attitudes towards distance and traditional education), and the qualitative data that is open to being questioned

when in fact statistical methods could be able to increase the reliability and validity of the findings. Taken all together, this research could be considered as a follow-up study of our previous study (see Erden & Tekarlan, 2014) and empower the idea that market value of distance education needs to be improved.

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