

How do Managers Regard Job Applicants with Online Degrees? Evidence from Turkey

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Abstract—This study addresses the debate on whether job applicants with online bachelor degrees would be perceived to be equals of those with traditional bachelor degrees; and whether the nature of the degree has an impact on the hiring decision of managers. We focus on bachelor's degrees earned on line due to the fact that hybrid education is not being delivered prevalently. In this respect, data were gathered from 20 managers working in various sectors who have an impact on the hiring process of job applicants. Findings indicate gatekeepers prefer applicants with traditional degrees. Besides factors associated with the preference of traditional degrees are found to be in line with previous research findings. Education quality, gain of competencies, development of communication skills, personal growth and the importance of student-instructor interaction were mostly repeated factors associated with the preference of traditional university degrees. Implications for future research are discussed in line with suggestions to overcome negative perceptions towards distance education.

Index Terms—Online degrees, job applicants, hiring decisions, managers.

I. INTRODUCTION

E-learning; defined as the convergence of virtual classrooms, digital collaboration and online learning; defined as technology based learning via internet, intranet or extranet [1], could be regarded as types of learning that take place in distance education. Distance education is a structured learning that uses the latest technology to bridge the gap between students and instructors separated by time and space [2]. Throughout the paper, we will use the term distance education to refer to type of education delivered off-campus and we will use the term traditional education to refer to education delivered on-campus and face-to-face, as our main focus is on the nature of degree earned through virtual methods or traditional coursework.

Distance education has gained increasing attention in education due to developing technology and rapid lifestyle changes. It could be regarded as a *product of an evolutionary development rooted in early attempts to teach and learn by correspondence* [3], as stated by Holmberg. In other words, distance education enables students to educate themselves through their own efforts and provides autonomy by removing time and space barriers between students and instructors. Revolving around a learner-centered nature, instructors become facilitators rather than teachers, targeting to stress student's

independent study to enhance learning [4].

Used in a variety of settings, distance education provide higher educational degrees for students who cannot physically attend to universities (because of time limitations or individual preferences), companies improve worker skills through online education tools, and individuals engage in distance education for self-development or career enhancement [5]. Certainly, distance education offers a variety of benefits to its providers and students.

Number of distance education universities, institutions and student enrollment in distance education has increased dramatically in the recent years. In a decade, authorities predict 10 million Turkish people to engage in distance education [6]. Statistics indicate that number of universities offering distance education has grown to 500 in European countries [7]. US Department of Education research report indicates that by the year

2007, 97% percent of two-year institutions and 89% of four-year colleges offered distance education in USA [8]. Obviously, the delivery of distance education has grown and numbers of student enrollments have increased so far.

Current proliferation in the era raises questions on advantages, disadvantages and educational quality of distance education programs as well as employability of graduates. Many studies have been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of distance education [9]-[11]. Research findings are mixed as to the quality of distance education could differ among institutions, programs, and nature of the courses. It seems reasonable to think that distance education could be more effective in terms of achieving learning outcomes under a variety of circumstances and vice versa. In addition to the uncertainty arising about the quality of distance education programs, employability of distance education graduates remains unclear. For instance, are virtually earned degrees equal with traditional degrees in the eyes of HR managers in companies? This said, our basic research question is to investigate the views of Turkish managers who impact hiring decisions about job applicants in their companies. We wonder whether managers would treat equally to job candidates with online degrees and traditional degrees. In this respect, background of the study is presented in the next section.

II. BACKGROUND

Literature survey suggests there are many advantages and disadvantages associated with distance education. A study conducted on four US sample of students identifies time flexibility, privacy, wealth of information provided, reinforcement of learning, ability to repeat exercises, gaining computer literacy and absence of the teacher as

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advantages of online education [12]. Surprisingly, three students stated that absence of the teacher was an advantage whereas 10 students identified absence of teacher as a disadvantage. This findings show that lack of student-teacher interaction could be perceived either positively or negatively by the students. Back to the research findings; lack of speaking, lack of interaction with peers, distraction and inadequate feedback were identified as disadvantages of e-learning. Lack of interaction is a reason cited as a disadvantage of e-learning by employers, as well [13]. In addition to the factors stated above, distance education provides access to courses with flexible scheduling, with less time and travel [10] as well as it is cost cutting for students and universities [14]. Besides ease of access to courses and information, cost advantages, flexibility and privacy, concerns about education quality seems to be the main disadvantages of distance education [9]. Online diploma mills could be unfair stigma attached to the quality of online education [15], as some employers might be skeptical about the academic honesty and true commitment of the students. Even if the online program really exists in an effective manner, still hiring executives could be skeptical about the potential of students cheating during exams and online evaluation [16]. Thus, credibility and quality of distance education programs could be highly questionable.

On the overall, many students around the globe are engaged in distance education. And the number of students is increasing. Well, researchers agree that distance education has advantages and disadvantages just like traditional education has. Many universities, many accredited institutions could be providing valuable education to their students. The education could be successful in terms of reaching learning outcomes and student development for sure. The online degree could be supportive for traditional degrees, as well. However, if we put aside the good and bad behind distance education, what goes on in the employment market is a question of interest, it is the managers' perceptions about candidates with distance education degrees. Thus, our main focus is on the facts behind employability of distance education graduates.

Common perception among the public about effectiveness of distance learning might not be as positive as traditional education [17]. Columbra and Monaghan's [13] literature review suggest that employers think online degrees lack rigor, lack face-to-face interaction, has potential of academic dishonesty and raises concerns about students' commitment to education. Seibold's [18] interviews with six HR managers cite similar disadvantages for distance education, pointing out to the lack of interactivity, potential of not fostering a sense of community, lack of student- instructor and student-peer interaction which might not contribute to development of verbal communication and team building skills.

Employability of distance education graduates has been investigated in academic settings. A study conducted on academic gatekeepers/professors [16], intending to investigate whether faculty staff with online degrees and traditional degrees would be treated equally in a university setting points out interesting results. Accordingly, 98% of academic gatekeepers preferred candidates with traditional

Ph.D degrees. When asked, they stated online Ph.D. degrees lack hands-on experience in labs, clinics, library work and mentored teaching as well as lack of interaction with other students and instructors, quality of education and potential of academic dishonesty. Flowers and Baltzer's [19] study on another sample of academic gatekeepers led to similar findings, as the preference of traditional Ph.D. degrees were much higher than online Ph.D. degrees. When asked, professors stated that online programs did not provide classroom interaction that encourages the development of personal/social skills. They also stated that Ph.D. experience was valued and applied research was important.

Evidence from corporate world confirms the findings mentioned above. Adams and DeFleur's [14] study conducted on a sample of HR executives sought to investigate whether managers considered the merits of a degree earned online or partially online is equal to a degree earned from a traditional university. 96% of the participants indicated they would prefer the candidate with traditional degree when they would have to make a decision among two participants with online and traditional degrees. When asked whether they would prefer a hybrid degree or traditional degree, 75% of the participants indicated they would prefer traditional degree. The authors stated that the nature of the degree seemed to be the main consideration for the hiring decision. When asked, managers rated lack of interaction, reputation, quality, potential for the lack of academic skills and experience as the reasons behind preferring traditional degrees instead of online degrees.

In Turkey, 48 universities out of 173 deliver distance education programs. 86 associate degree programs, 28 bachelor's degree programs and 82 master's degree programs are known to currently exist [20]. No online Ph.D. program has yet been delivered among distance education universities and hybrid education is known to be delivered in two universities with solely nine programs. Hybrid programs are not as common as traditional or online bachelor degrees yet. For this reason, we did not gather manager views on hybrid degrees. Additionally, as online master's programs could be supportive of traditional degrees, we solely focused on traditional bachelor degrees and online bachelor degrees to investigate whether a job applicant with an online degree or with a traditional degree would be more preferable from the perspective of managers. Sample characteristics and data gathering tools are presented in the next section.

III. METHOD

Data were gathered mostly from managers/human resources specialists, referred to as gatekeepers, working in various sectors in the city of Istanbul. 24 gatekeepers were reached with convenience sampling method. 20 usable questionnaires were returned on the overall. Four questionnaires were excluded from the study due to missing answers. As a result, 14 males and six females, with an average age of 38 took part in the study. 11 participants had traditional university degrees, seven participants had master's degree, only one participant had elementary school degree and one participant did not indicate his education degree.

Seven HR specialists, 10 managers, two employers and one engineer, who had an impact on the hiring processes in their companies were included in the sample. Nine participants were employed in the automobile sector, three were employed in construction companies, and four were employed in production companies, the rest were employed in chemistry, textile, risk management and consultancy companies.

Due to space limitations, the questionnaire used in the study could not be attached. Instead, we will try to give information regarding the form. Basically, the study had three research questions. First, participants were asked to make a choice among two job applicants who apply for the same open position. In the scenario, job applicants were presented as if they were equal in terms of their knowledge, skills, and ability levels; in other words they had the same qualifications that could have an impact on the hiring decision of gatekeepers. The only difference was among the nature of the university degrees; one applicant having a traditional degree whereas the other applicant having a virtual degree. The other two research questions were open-ended as participants were asked to write the factors that influenced their decision about choosing the applicant with traditional or virtual degree. Finally, participants were asked to confirm whether university degree was an important criterion for hiring employees. Gender, education degree, position in the company and the business segment of the company were also asked as demographic questions with the aim of gathering information about participant profiles.

IV. FINDINGS

19 participants preferred the job applicant with traditional university degree while only one participant chose the job applicant with online degree.

The reason of preferring online degree could be quoted as *"The job applicant with online degree could have had job experience while having online education"*. The participant also wrote that virtual degrees and traditional degrees were equivalent on the overall. This was an unexpected finding, giving signals of a potential positive attitude of the participant towards online education. Still, majority of the managers / HR specialists (19 out of 20), chose the job applicant with traditional degree.

Second, factors associated with the preference of job applicants with traditional versus virtual degrees were grouped. Accordingly, education quality was cited three times. One participant wrote *"I believe university education cannot be received online"*. One participant stated *"I believe online courses might not be internalized by the students. Besides, the exams might not be proper to make valid student evaluations"*. Another participant wrote *"Knowledge, competencies and expertise required for professions could better be received in traditional university settings"*. Similarly, three other participants stated that the required competencies to perform the job could be well developed in traditional university settings. Two participants mentioned communication skills development in traditional university settings. Example of a sentence is *"I think communication skills could better be*

developed with face-to-face interaction in real educational settings". Social skill development was cited by four participants, and personal growth was cited by three participants. Three participants stated that in traditional education settings, teamwork and the associated skills could be enhanced, as well. Instructor-student interaction and its benefits in traditional university settings were also mentioned as one participant wrote *"The students have access to libraries and academicians are likely to contribute to student perspectives"*. Gain of academic experience, shoulder of responsibilities such as completing assignments, taking part in projects, and attending

to classes during university years were cited to be other reasons associated with the preference of the applicant with traditional degree.

Finally, 16 participants confirmed that the university degree was an important criterion for hiring decisions; three other participants stated that there was much more important criterion than university degree, such as job experience. Job experience was mentioned as the only important criterion in addition to university degree. Only one participant did not answer the confirmation question.

V. CONCLUSION

Findings reached through the small sample of Turkish managers/HR specialists employed in various industries confirm the previous study findings [14], [16]. Accordingly, virtual degrees are not perceived to be equals of traditional degrees due to their learner-centered and computer-based nature when compared with the interactive environments in traditional educational settings, which were seen to be more favorable for students' development on the overall.

Factors associated with the preference of traditional degrees could be grouped as education quality, gain of required competencies, development of communication and social skills with project assignments as well as student-instructor interaction, gaining a sense of responsibility and academic experience. Participants believed that traditional educational settings could deliver more qualified education, could enhance competencies and skills with peer and instructor interaction. On the overall, participants seemed to agree that academic experience was important for enhancing personal growth and enlarging student perspectives. Those factors seem to be in line with previously mentioned factors, as discussed in the background section [13], [14], [16], [18].

Mostly, participants confirmed that the university degree was an important criterion that influenced their hiring decisions. Based on that, we believe the preference of traditional degree over virtual degree raises an important concern about the employability of graduates who have solely virtual degrees in Turkey. Besides, many new universities have been established in the last years among various cities all around the country. The increase in the number of traditional universities gives rise to the competition among the long-established public universities and newly opened private universities. This said, virtual degrees could be supportive of traditional degrees and add value to the employability of job candidates. However, having solely virtual degrees might not be satisfying for the

employers when we consider the increasing number of graduates with traditional university degrees.

The study has many limitations such as the small sample size, heterogeneity of the sample in terms of position levels, and usage of open-ended questions which do not allow to conduct statistical analyses. The participants could have been interviewed to gather deeper information, as well. Due to time and other likely constraints, additional data gathering methods were not applied. Truly, this study could be regarded as a pilot study conducted to gather managerial views towards distance education. No doubt that it needs to be developed with further research. However, we believe this study could draw attention to the employability of graduates with online degrees and inspire future research to investigate the case of job applicants with online degrees in Turkey. Increase in the quality of distance education programs could well be presented with the evaluation of program quality rankings. Future research could also compare traditional degree, virtual degree and hybrid degree graduates in terms of their knowledge, skill and ability levels. We believe research would help to overcome the negative managerial perceptions towards distance education, especially when in fact it could offer high quality education.

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