

The Value of Distance Education Degrees in Career Development

**Puvaneswary Murugaiah, Yen Siew Hwa, Saw Kim Guan,
Nailul Morad Mohd Nor, Mohd Nain Hj. Awang,
Surjani Soetardjo & Wan Asna Wan Mohd Nor**

School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia,
11800 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

ampuva@usm.my, shyen@usm.my, kgsaw@usm.my, nmnor@usm.my,
mnain@usm.my, suryanis@usm.my, wmnasna@usm.my

Abstract

Distance education is one important avenue that could provide educational opportunities to working adults either in formal education, in professional development or in skills training. It is also gaining ground in Malaysia where there are now four public universities, three private universities and two private open universities that offer distance education programmes. However, there is a growing concern regarding the impact of these programmes on working adults, specifically on their career development. This study explores the Universiti Sains Malaysia School of Distance Education (SDE) graduates' perception of how the programme has affected their subsequent career development and progress. A total of 90 graduates from the SDE were randomly selected from 11 of the 13 states in Malaysia. Based on the interview data, it can be discerned that degrees offered by the SDE did not really lead to a job change but in the majority of cases, they led to job promotions, notably in the public sector. Government employees enjoyed relatively easier promotion and their job security was guaranteed unlike their private sector counterparts who faced stiff competition for promotions. Moreover in the private sector, in many instances promotions were based on performance rather than paper qualifications. A closer inspection of the data revealed that the distance education degree does not differ from conventional degrees as far as job change, promotions, responsibilities and security are concerned. It is on par with other degrees. This augurs well for the School of Distance Education, USM as it demonstrates the value of its degrees in the job market.

Keywords: distance education, career development

Abstrak

Pendidikan jarak jauh merupakan satu cara penting yang dapat memberi peluang pendidikan sama ada dalam bentuk pendidikan formal, pembangunan profesional atau latihan kemahiran kepada orang dewasa yang bekerja. Ia semakin ketara di Malaysia kerana kini terdapat empat buah universiti awam, tiga buah universiti swasta dan dua buah universiti terbuka swasta yang menawarkan program pendidikan jarak jauh. Walau bagaimanapun, keprihatinan kian meningkat berkenaan impak kesemua program ini ke atas orang dewasa yang bekerja, khususnya terhadap pembangunan kerjaya mereka. Kajian ini meneliti persepsi graduan dari Pusat Pengajian Pendidikan Jarak Jauh (PPPJJ), Universiti Sains Malaysia bagi mengetahui sejauh mana program yang diambil itu memberi kesan kepada kemajuan dan pembangunan kerjaya mereka. Sejumlah 90 graduan PPPJJ dipilih secara rambang dari 11 daripada 13 negeri di Malaysia. Berdasarkan data temuduga, didapati ijazah yang ditawarkan oleh PPPJJ tidak benar-benar membawa kepada perubahan pekerjaan tetapi dalam kebanyakan kes, ia membawa kepada kenaikan pangkat terutamanya dalam sektor awam. Kakitangan kerajaan menikmati kenaikan pangkat relatif lebih mudah dan jaminan pekerjaan mereka telah dijamin tidak seperti rakan sektor swasta mereka yang menghadapi saingan sengit untuk kenaikan pangkat, promosi. Tambahan pula, dalam sektor swasta, kenaikan pangkat diberi berdasarkan prestasi kerja dan bukannya kelayakan kertas. Penelitian data yang lebih lanjut menunjukkan bahawa tiada perbezaan antara ijazah pendidikan jarak jauh dengan ijazah konvensional dari segi pertukaran pekerjaan, kenaikan pangkat, tanggungjawab dan jaminan pekerjaan. Ia adalah setaraf dengan ijazah lain. Ini merupakan petanda baik bagi Pusat Pengajian Pendidikan Jarak Jauh, USM kerana ia memperlihatkan nilai ijazahnya dalam pasaran pekerjaan

Kata kunci: pendidikan jarak jauh, pembangunan kerjaya

Introduction

Higher education plays a very important role in the era of knowledge economy where knowledge is replacing physical resources as the main driver of economic growth. This is in line with the aims of vision 2020, Malaysia's vision of becoming a fully developed nation by the year 2020, which include establishing a scientific and progressive society in 2020 – a society that not only consumes technology but also contributes to the scientific and technological civilisation of the future. Besides that, a knowledge-based workforce capable of exploiting ICT to create new

economic opportunities needs to be developed as it will provide the platform to sustain rapid economic growth and enhance international competitiveness. This marks a transition from an industrialised economy to a k-economy.

The role of education is particularly crucial for Malaysia to achieve this vision. However, every year about 100,000 SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) holders enter the job market without any further education or skills training. Today, 75% of the Malaysian labor force is low-skilled compared to Singapore labor force where only 51% of the labor force is low-skilled. Thus, distance education (DE) is one important avenue that could provide educational opportunities to working adults either in formal education, in professional development or in skills training. It comes as no surprise, therefore that distance education is gaining ground in Malaysia. There are now four public universities, three private universities and two private open universities that offer distance education programmes besides the conventional face-to-face programmes. In 2009, the total enrolment for distance education students at the four public universities was 10,929 and the enrolment at the five private universities was 84,673 (Morshidi, Yen and Rosni, 2010).

However, the contribution of DE programmes to the job market is rather vague. There is growing concern regarding the impact of these programmes on working adults, specifically on their career development. This study explores Universiti Sains Malaysia School of Distance Education graduates' perception of how the programme has affected their career and job responsibilities.

Background

The School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia has come a long way since its inception in 1971 where only the Arts programme with courses in the Humanities and Social Sciences was offered to 71 students. Currently four undergraduate programmes are offered - Science, Social Science, Arts and Management. The delivery modes of these courses at the School of Distance Education include printed materials and videoconferencing, electronic portal and streaming Internet video. Moreover, students are required to attend a face-to-face intensive programme at the main campus for about 3 weeks held at the end of the

year. Although most of the distant learners are working adults with ages ranging from 23 to 75 years, they deem the programme suitable. In fact, this blended learning mode seems appropriate for all other stakeholders too: instructors, administrators and employers.

The School of Distance Education has produced more than 11,000 graduates since it started in 1971. In 2009, the total students' intake was 1,657 and the total enrolment was 5,809 (about 53% of the total enrolment of distance education students in public universities in Malaysia). The increasing number of students reflects positively on the School of Distance Education; that is, the courses provided, delivery and learning modes employed as well as the instructional and administrative practices. This is apparent from studies conducted by Zin et al. (2003) and Daing Zaidah (2003). While learning improvements of students, instructional strategies and technology adoptions are crucial in distance education system, the contribution of the DE programme to the job market is also important.

This paper is part of a research project on the value of distance education degrees to adult learners. The objective of the project was to examine the value of graduates from the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia based on perceptions of the graduates themselves. A total of 90 graduates from the School of Distance Education were randomly selected from all the 13 states in Malaysia except from Negeri Sembilan and Perlis. The question that this paper aims to answer is 'What are the students' perceptions of the impact of the programmes offered by the School of Distance Education on their subsequent career development and progress'.

Related Literature

Research on distance education has primarily focused on the media used. With the advent of web technologies, studies comparing traditional and online media are abundant. However, many researchers are questioning the validity of such comparative studies as they claim there is no conclusive significant difference between the media (Russell, 1999; Lockee, Moore and Burton, 2001). Due to this, there is now a shift towards evaluating specific DE programmes as not all of them are the same or are effective (Rovai, 2003).

Evaluation is a key component for any improvement, renewal and long-term success of a programme. Willis (1993, p. 70) emphasised that “even the best designed or adapted distance delivered course will likely require revision”. To achieve and maintain quality of a programme, evaluations must be carried out. According to Keegan (1996) the evaluation of any distance education programme should focus on four aspects: (a) the quantity of the learning (enrollment, new learner markets, and course-completion rates), (b) the quality of the learning (effectiveness of courses or program to enable desired learner outcomes), (c) the status of the learning (transferability of coursework and employer recognition of degrees and certificates), and (d) the relative cost of the learning (institutional cost effectiveness and cost benefits).

The systems model is one approach used to evaluate distance education programmes (Rossi, Freeman and Lipsey, 1999). It is a valuable model as DE programmes are evaluated as whole rather than evaluating in parts which do not take into account the overall effectiveness of the programme. In this model, there are four types of evaluation: input, process, output, and/or impact evaluation. An input evaluation identifies and evaluates the capabilities of the system; that is the delivery methods, expertise, strategies used and also the design. In process evaluation, the running of the programme is evaluated. It provides information on the strengths and weaknesses of all the components of the programme. Output evaluation, on the other hand, determines the immediate or short-term effects of the programme whereas impact evaluation identifies the long term effects on society. The performance of graduates in their jobs is often tracked for the latter (Rovai, 2003).

It must be noted that the current study is not aimed at evaluating the DE programme at SDE fully. It intends to examine students’ perception of the impact of their DE degree on their career development. The students’ perception of their DE degree is vital in the evaluation of the DE programme and in tandem with Moore’s transactional distance theory (Moore, 1972) which underpins the research project of this paper. The theory establishes the fact that it is the distant learners who are key players in deciding the goal, learning activities and future direction of a DE programme. Their feedback are crucial as they are continuously making decisions relating to their study needs, impact, challenges and other related issues.

The current research, in part, is an impact evaluation as it explored the extent to which the programme met student needs, goals and expectations. Moreover, it investigated the value of the degree at the workplace. In other words, the extent to which it enhanced their career is examined. This is vital as a promotion or new position due to newly acquired skills or knowledge is an indicator of a programme's success (Lockee, Moore and Burton, 2002). Several impact evaluation studies on DE programmes have been conducted. Demiray (2000), for instance, demonstrated the positive impact of distance education on career progress and development. This study indicated that Distance Education graduates of Turkey's Anadolu Open University experienced income increment, promotion to higher positions, were given more job responsibilities, and applied what they have learned to their jobs. Fahy, Spencer and Halinski (2008) affirmed this finding. Their study revealed that DE degree from Athabasca University has impacted their graduates' careers and also their plans for the future. In another study, Delany (2002) found that one way of defining graduate success is by looking at the level of income and job responsibilities. Her study however associated success to age and gender and surprisingly, not educational achievements. Contrary to this finding, most other studies indicated that academic achievements did contribute to career development. Davidson-Shivers, Inpornjivit and Seller (2004), for example, showed that most alumni believed their degree had helped them to attain their current position. A similar study carried out in Australia also reported that the majority of the alumni credited their career enhancement to their educational and training achievements (Martin et al., 2010).

Methodology

The current research is a study on the students' perception as data derived are the students' opinions of the DE system, their experiences and learning environment as well as the impact of the programmes on their career development. This study indicated students' experience from their own perspective and judgment that can provide valuable insights with regards to programme enhancement (Martin et al., 2010). Graduate feedback is pivotal because 'understanding one's present market and relative performance on key dimensions should enhance departmental planning and programme development' (Morgan & Shim, 1990, p. 48 as cited in Martin et al., 2010).

Table 1 Participants' location, age and programme

States	No of participants (%)	Age	No of participants (%)	Programme	No of participants (%)
Johor	3 (3.3)	25–30	1 (1.1)	Social Science	37 (41.1)
Kedah	4 (4.4)	31–34	3 (3.3)	Humanities	25 (27.7)
Kelantan	13 (14.5)	35–40	29 (32.2)	Management	11 (12.2)
Malacca	2 (2.2)	41–44	37 (41.1)	Science	16 (17.7)
Pahang	10 (11.1)	45–50	19 (21.1)	Education	1 (1.1)
Penang	20 (22.2)	50–54	1 (1.1)		
Perak	6 (6.6)				
Kuala Lumpur/ Selangor	17 (18.8)				
Sabah	6 (6.6)				
Sarawak	7 (7.7)				
Terengganu	2 (2.2)				

(Total participants: 90)

Table 2 Participants' gender, ethnicity and professions

Race	No of participants (%)	Gender	No of participants (%)	Work Sector	No of participants (%)
Malay	73 (81.1)	Male	58 (64.4)	Public (<i>Teachers</i>)	78 (86.7) [39(43.3)]
Chinese	7 (7.7)	Female	32 (35.6)	Private	12 (13.3)
Indian	3 (3.3)				
Others	7 (7.7)				

Participants were purposively sourced from student records based on their year of graduation (2003–2006) and also type of programme. Ninety participants from various age and ethnic groups, locations, backgrounds and professions (as shown in Tables 1 and 2) were involved in this study. To examine student perceptions, a semi-structured interview was carried out between April and September 2008 in all the eleven states. Prior arrangements were made regarding the venue and time of the interview. A pretested set of ten questions on various aspects including skills and knowledge acquired, the comparison of degree to that from other universities and the impact on career were posed to the participants. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for the purpose of analysis. The

NVIVO (version 8.0) software was employed for data management and analysis.

Results

As this study focuses on the impact of DE degree on career, only questions pertaining to this; that is, regarding job changes, promotions, responsibilities and security were analysed. In this study, the four aspects/areas could be categorised into themes. Table 3 presents the frequency of the themes that emerged in each aspect. Findings of the study would be presented based on the four aspects.

Table 3 Impact on career

	Number (%)
Job change	3 (3.9)
In the process of changing job	5 (6.6)
Change in job	68 (89.5)
No change in job	
Total	76
Job promotion	
Promoted	48 (56.5)
Expected to be promoted soon	13 (15.3)
Have not applied/no vacancies	18 (21.2)
Does not help in promotion	6 (7.0)
Total	85
Job responsibilities	
More responsibility	54 (65)
Same responsibility	29 (35)
Total	83
Job security	
Contribution to job security	49 (71)
No contribution to job security	20 (29)
Total	69

Job Change

Table 3 shows that almost 90% of the participants did not change their job. They could have been promoted or given higher responsibilities but they remained in the same job. For example, government school teachers who made up about 40% of the participants remained as teachers although most of them have been promoted to a higher grade.

KB04: *Selepas mendapat ijazah saya masih kekal lah, masih dalam profession yang sama lah, kalau dulu daripada menjadi seorang guru yang tidak berijazah menjadi guru yang berijazah.*

[After attained my degree, I'm still in the same profession...from a non-graduate teacher to a graduate teacher.]

KK03: *Sebab memang, sebelum berijazah pun jadi guru, lepas itu bila berijazah, teruskan pekerjaan jadi guru...*

[...because before being a graduate, I was a teacher, after graduating, continue being a teacher...]

This also applies to other graduates in the civil service such as government officers and those in the police force.

KL01: *Sebenarnya tak ada ... sebab saya ambil ijazah itu pun bersesuaian dengan bidang tugas saya...dengan masyarakat...saya ambil sains kemasyarakatan kan, jadi bersangkutan-paut dengan masyarakat lah. Jadi dari dulu sampai sekarang masih sama lah.*

[Actually no change...because my degree is relevant to my job...being with the society...I took social science (degree), so it's related to society. So it's the same job for me, before and after my degree.]

KK06: *Saya masih kekal dengan polis. Sebab...ia punya prospektif luas juga bagi bahagian pentadbiran tak ada masalah lah, sesuai apa yang kita belajar dengan polis, ada sesuaiannya.*

[I'm still with the police force. Because...it's got wide prospects, also no problems in the administrative side, what we have studied is relevant to the job in the police force.]

Only 5 out of 76 participants (6.6%) actually changed jobs after getting a degree from the School of Distance Education. One of them, AS56, was working as a clerk before venturing into teaching after graduating.

AS56: *Sudah tukar lah, dulu saya clerk di PPKT, sekarang saya tukar pendidikan. Kira itu lain lah kan.*

[Have changed (job), before I was a clerk at PPKT, now I've moved to education...so it's different.]

Two participants managed to upgrade themselves from being technicians to science officers.

KB04: *Saya sudah apply jadi tukar pegawai sains, saya sudah dapat, baru enam bulan...*

[I applied for the post of science officer, I got it...about 6 months ago...]

KB06: Saya sudah berubah kepada pegawai sains lah...baru dapat ijazah dan saya dapat pegawai sains.
[I have changed (job)...science officer...just got my degree and I got the science officer post.]

There were three participants who were in the process of changing jobs or were planning to do so. For example, PK37 has put on hold his plans to change jobs due to the economic slowdown.

PK37: ...saya ada mohon, tapi peluangnya sikit lagi, mungkin tahun depan, sebab sekarang ini ekonomi gawat kan.
[I applied but chances are slim, perhaps next year because at present there's economic slowdown.]

A somewhat similar trend can be seen in the private sector too. Some participants did not undergo a job change, as revealed by participants PG53 and KK2.

PG53: *Tak ada, saya masih buat kerja yang sama, cuma gaji itu dinaikkan sedikit lah daripada yang sebelum ini. Dan saya pun tak bercadang nak tukar ke tempat-tempat lain sebab saya rasa saya nak sambung buat master, dan tempat ini adalah tempat platform yang baik bagi saya lah. Jadi saya tunggu lagi lah.*
[No, I'm still doing the same job, there has been a slight pay rise. And I don't intend to move to other places, as I'd like to continue my studies and do a Master degree. This place is a good platform for me. So I just wait.]

KK2: *Rasanya tidak sebab kerja sekarang ini lebih kepada sumber manusia, pengurusan sumber manusia....sebab yang keperluan sebagai pelengkap itu daripada 'NIOSH', Institute Keselamatan dan Kesihatan Pekerjaan Negara.*
[No as my present job is related to human resource management...the need of a post is decided by NIOSH, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health.]

Others had applied for new posts or undergone interviews but have not succeeded thus far. Hence, they were still holding the same posts as they did prior to obtaining their degrees.

KCG6: *Setakat hari ini belum ditukarkan, masih kekal kerja lama. Saya telah menghadiri temuduga beberapa kali...rezeki belum dapat pada kita orang...Belum dapat tempat kerja.*
[Have not been moved yet, still at the same job. I have attended interviews several times...but have not succeeded yet...have not got a new post yet.]

KCG2: *Masih dengan jawatan dulu. Ada juga usaha lah untuk mendapatkan interview, tapi setakat ini belum lagi ada peluang lah.*

[Same post...have tried applying for an interview, but have not succeeded yet.]

A few of those who worked in the private sector did change their jobs after graduating. The new post was job promotion. Upon graduation participant KL10 for example, was given an executive post at a different unit, a change from being a station master at the operation unit within the same organisation.

KL10: *...last time, I had been on operation side, pengurus station or station master...operation side. But now here I am as an executive, so still here...but different unit.*

KK4 was also promoted and given a new post at his workplace, Telekom Malaysia.

KK4: *Selepas saya mendapat ijazah itu tahun 2004...saya submit keputusan itu. And then 2005 itu saya dapat naik pangkat lah. Sebelum itu saya marketing officer saja lah. Pegawai marketing itu bukan executive...di Telekom Malaysia ada dua tahap lah, satu executive, satu non-executive...itu lah saya bangga dapat degree dari USM.*

[After graduating, I submitted my results in 2004. In 2005, I was promoted. Before that, I was only a marketing officer...not an executive...At Telekom Malaysia, there are two levels, executive and non-executive...that's why I'm proud of obtaining a degree from USM.]

Job Responsibilities

The analysis revealed that in most instances job responsibilities increased when participants were armed with a degree. Out of the 83 participants who responded, 54 of them (65%) stated that they were given more job responsibilities while 29 others (35%) claimed that their job responsibilities remained the same.

An increase in job responsibilities involved not only new tasks but also more commitment and decision-making opportunities. For MK43, both her administrative and teaching duties increased after obtaining a degree.

MK43: *...jadi guru perancang ko-kurikulum, I am in charge of the co-curriculum of the school. Responsibility compared to when I mengajar di sekolah menengah dulu, setiausaha sukan, (taught in the former secondary*

school, I was the sports secretary) its... *perbezaannya sana with kids, di sekolah menengah, I buat program with orang muda* (the difference is there in the secondary school, I did programmes with youngsters). *Di sini* (Here) I have to deal with teachers, I will give duty to teachers, and then I have to see programme *itu jalan*, (runs) I have to plan some programmes for teachers, so responsibility *sudah berbeza* (different). And then students *juga, sekolah rendah dengan sekolah menengah* (too, primary and secondary school students) So... approaches *kita, methodology kita berbeza* (changes). ...So, compared to this secondary school, I have to teach *kemahiran hidup* (living skills) and things like that. So responsibility yes, is heavy, but I am happy.

Similarly, AS53 felt more responsible as his job after graduating involved giving talks to the public. He affirmed that his tertiary education had built his confidence levels and the knowledge he had obtained was useful to the job.

AS53: *Lebih tanggungjawab, dan kita pun rasa kalau kita diberi tanggungjawab,... walau pun kita dalam jawatan yang lama, tapi kita kadangkala kita terpaksa pergi ceramah kepada orang ...Tapi bila kita ada degree ini, kita rasa keyakinan kita ini lebih...kita ada terlibat dalam khidmat negara, penasihat kemasyarakatan. Jadi bila berikan ceramah ini, ilmu yang kita ada itu kita masukkan sekali lah, kita gunakan lah dalam itu.*

[More responsibilities, and we feel if given the responsibility...although holding the same post, we have to give talks to people...But with a degree, we feel more confident...we are involved in national service, community advisory (groups). So when we give talks, the knowledge we have is utilised.]

JB27 on the other hand, claimed his new responsibilities involved making decisions.

JB27: *...lebih banyak kepada perkembangan minda saya lah sebab sebelum graduate, kita banyak mengambil benda yang kata simple, apa yang disuruh, kita buat. Tapi lepas graduate, kita diajar untuk membina idea, untuk buat benda yang baru tapi tidak lari daripada matlamat, jadi sikit sebanyak membantu saya lah. Sebab yang saya lihat, pengajian yang saya lalu selama 3 tahun dalam USM banyak membantu saya buat,... kemampuan saya membuat keputusan.*

[...more to mind development because before I graduated, we did simple things: we did what was being asked. But after graduating, we were taught to build ideas, do new things but without deviating from the goal, so that helped me. For I see, my 3 years of study in USM has helped me...in my ability to make decisions.]

About one third of the participants stated that their job responsibilities did not increase but rather were different from those prior to their graduation.

KL04's job responsibilities changed from working outside the office to working inside.

KL04: *Dulu actually saya...kerja di luar, DBKL juga, saya monitor kerja-kerja orang lah...alam flora...macam mana dia punya... prestasi kerja. Tapi sekarang ini sudah duduk sini, saya terlibat dengan politik lah, macam orang bawah datang, saya decide macam mana nak buat, ini hal perumahan juga, masalah orang miskin ini macam mana nak buat, macam itu saja lah.*

[Before, I actually was working outside, in DBKL, I monitored the work of others...environment...how's their work performance. But now I sit here (in the office), I'm involved in politics, when the subordinates come, I decide what to do, whether housing or poverty, how to handle or solve them, that's how it is.]

In the private sector too, job responsibilities increased when employees are degree holders. They include having more work commitments and doing new tasks. For instance, for participant KK4, having a degree meant greater commitment to the job.

KK04: *Memang jelas lah,.. jadi kerja itu bertambah, tanggungjawab bidang kerja itu lagi besar, dan commitment itu pun lebih, jadi kalau sudah executive itu ia, ... kita punya tugas dan tanggungjawab itu ia tidak lagi macam ikut jadual waktu. So anytime kalau pengurus besar panggil kita hari Sabtu Ahad kena kita kerja juga. Kita sudah jadi executive, tanggungjawab kita sudah jadi besar lah.*

[It's obvious, more work, more responsibilities, and more commitments, when we become an executive, our work and responsibilities no longer follow a rigid schedule. Our managing director can call us anytime, Saturday, Sunday, we have to work. We are executives, our responsibilities are huge.]

In another case, KL07 had to form a new unit at her work place. This involved a new set of responsibilities for her.

KL07: *Ok, so...I involved dalam (in) quality, I am the one who set up the new unit lah, before that Socso tak ada (had no) unit quality...they create a new,...function for me to handle lah. So, that means now I handle penilaian pejabat (office evaluation) and do the analysis, the pencapaian (performance), then come out with what is the cost, and then what is the tindakan (actions taken), correction... all this things lah.*

For KL10, there was a change in job responsibilities but not an increase. He described the changes in his job – from dealing with trains to dealing with people.

KL10: *Ok, in short lah. So, station master... do few work,.. almost like we applying physical a lot lah. So, to control the movement of the train, the safety of the train. So, when I come here, now it is more to practical and something like*

doing marketing, so, with so many people lah. I have to go out,..

Job Promotion

Job promotion involved a rise in ranking and a salary increment. Most of the participants either got their job promotion after they obtained their degree or believed that their degree did enhance their chances to be promoted. As shown in Table 3, 79 of the 85 participants (93%) believed that possessing a degree helped or would help them to get their job promotion or pay increment. Out of these, 48 of them were promoted; and 13 others had applied and some had already attended interviews. They were confident and hopeful that they would be getting their promotion soon. Eighteen of the participants hoped that the degree would help them to get their promotion but most of them had yet to apply for the promotion because there were no vacancies for the posts. Only 6 stated that their degree did not help them in their job promotion or salary increment.

Most of the participants working in the public sector can apply for promotion after they obtained their degree. The normal procedure is that they will be promoted only after they are successful in the interviews. Some government agencies also required them to pass certain forms of assessment.

Out of the 78 participants who were working in the public sector, 39 of them (50%) were teachers. For them their promotion involved a shift of rank from DG29/DG32 to DG41, which is characterised by an increment in salary.

KK1: Ya, saya dinaikkan pangkat menjadi ketua panitia di SMK Bukit Jakil kemudian dinaikkan pangkat dari DG32 kepada DG41.

[Yes, I was promoted to be chief coordinator at SMK Bukit Jakil and later promoted from DG32 to DG41].

Whereas school teacher (KK3) stated that her basic income doubled when she was promoted from an ‘attachment’ post after getting her degree.

KK3: ...semasa memegang jawatan sebagai guru sandaran (tak terlatih), basic income baru RM800 lebih, tapi pengorbanan 5 tahun ini untuk dapat ijazah, terus ubah dari segi income, dia terus lompat jadi RM1,700 lebih...

[...when I was holding the attachment (untrained) post, my basic pay was only RM800 plus but after sacrificing 5 years to get my degree, my pay increased to

more than RM1,700...]

PK35 indicated that her promotion to a senior assistant had to do with her degree.

PK35: *Saya jadi PK 2007. Saya umur 43, consider PK (penolong kanan) agak muda. Jadinya,.. tiba-tiba pun saya tak tahu saya dilantik menjadi PK...saya rasa jawatan itu adalah sebab saya mendapat ijazah.*

[I am 43 years old, as a senior assistant I am considered quite young to hold that post. I did not expect to be given this post...I think this post was given to me because I got my degree.]

In the police force having a degree is an important requirement for their promotion. It will contribute to higher 'points' which can be translated as a greater chance for promotion.

KL03: *Semasa saya belajar, saya inspector, selepas saya convo 2002/2003, saya memohon untuk kadet ASP, tapi tak dapat. Tapi dalam 2005 saya interview lagi sekali, dapat naik pangkat lah...tapi orang yang tak ada degree pun, dia punya peluang nak naik pangkat, cuma kita punya markah, dua markah saja dapat sebenarnya, tapi dua markah dalam itu menjarakkan kita dengan 10 orang...adalah peluang lebih baik dengan dua markah itu.*

[When I was a studying, I was an inspector, after my graduation in 2002/2003, I applied for ASP (cadet assistant superintendent of police) but was rejected. In 2005, I attended the interview again, I was promoted...for those who do not have a degree will also have the opportunity but we get points, 2 points to be exact but the 2 points would put you ahead of 10 other people...have better chance with that 2 points.]

KL11 shared a similar view.

KL11: Again we look at the point system in the interview. When we were called for the interview, the interview board will look at the points that we had scored. So the academic (having a degree) will increase the points which we can get.

KB07 who worked in the public health sector was promoted from a technician to an officer post.

KB07: *...2006 itu saya dinaikkan pangkat dari technician makmal perubatan dinaikkan pangkat ke kanan jadi ia gaji tinggi, lepas itu bila kenaikan gaji,.. kenaikan gaji ketogori B itu ia naik 25% kan, bila ia naik pegawai sains, ia naik lagi tinggi*

[...in 2006, I was promoted from medical laboratory technician to a senior post, so I got a higher pay...a promotion to B category with 25% pay increment, when I was promoted to science officer, my pay increased further...]

Apart from those who had already been promoted, thirteen others (16.7%) had attended interviews for promotion and were waiting for offer letters. They were confident and hopeful that they would be getting their promotion soon. AS54 and KTN03's statements attest to this.

AS54: *Buat masa sekarang belum lagi. Tapi saya yakin lah, peluang saya akan lebih tinggi.*

[At the moment I have yet to get my promotion. But I am confident, I have better chance.]

KTN 03: *...setakat ini saya sedang menunggu sebab saya belum mendapat surat lantikan lagi, DG41.*

[...up till now, I am still waiting because I have not received the appointment letter for DG41 yet...]

Eighteen of them (23.1%) felt that there were still opportunities for them to be promoted but they did not apply for it or there were no vacancies for a higher post.

PK37: *Setakat ini tak ada, tunggu ini lah...jawatan kosong.*

[Up till now there is none, I am waiting...for vacancies]

One participant felt that his degree did not help him to get a permanent post as he was employed under contract in a government agency. Hence, he would not be promoted because job promotion was only for those who were permanently employed.

KTN 10: *Dari segi kerjaya itu saya rasa mungkin saya berpeluang lah untuk dapat jawatan yang tetap dengan kelulusan. Tapi selepas 2-3 tahun saya cuba apply, ada panggil lah interview tapi dari segi itu...ialah keadaan mungkin tak memihak saya lah. (tak berjaya dalam temuduga)*

[In my career, I think I should have the chance to get a permanent post with my qualification. But after 2-3 years I tried applying. I was called for interviews but ...the situation was not favourable to me (was not successful in the interviews)]

It was quite different for those in the private sector whereby, only 50% of the 12 participants were promoted.

KK4 felt that the degree he obtained from USM has helped him in his promotion compared to his other colleagues who got their degrees from other universities.

KK4: *"Tapi...itu lah saya bangga dapat degree dari USM because kalau ikut ada lagi senior saya sudah graduate, tapi dia mungkin jurusan yang tidak sesuai masih belum dapatlah. Mereka dapat degree dari: contoh universiti***, bidang komunikasi lah, bidang lain-lain lah,...So 2005 itu saya dapat degree,.. tak sampai setahun lah, saya dapat naik pangkat lah".*

[but..I am proud that I got my degree from USM because there are seniors who have graduated earlier, but maybe is the field which is not suitable, they are still not promoted yet. They got their degree from ***university in communication and other fields, so in 2005 when I got my degree...within less than a year, I was promoted.]

KL07 also felt that USM degree has helped him in his promotion but he opined that his promotion is mainly due to heavier responsibilities given to him in setting up a new unit in his company.

(KL07: *Ya, promoted lah. I got promoted 2 kali dalam 4 bulan (twice in 4 months)...*

First saya masuk pegawai (I joined as an officer)...pegawai executive (executive officer), is a first level officer, and then...I join USM, promoted again,...second time. And then I got my degree, I think in December, yes December, promoted lagi sekali (again). Lepas itu (after that)...February, ...this February I promoted again... that is why I said because government different, you need qualification to move, ...I set a new unit...they upgrade the unit to a higher level.

However, some participants in this study felt that their degree did not bring about job promotion. One believed that his promotion was due to his performance but not his degree.

PP66: *Kenaikan pangkat ada, tapi bukan berdasarkan kelayakan akademik yang saya perolehi lah. Cuma dari segi performance saya lah...*

[promotion yes, but it was not based on my academic achievement. Just from my job performance...]

One of the participants cited age as one of the factor that hindered her promotion. Even possessing a degree did not help as there was a stiff competition from younger graduates in the market.

KL09: *Rancangan saya memang untuk promotion lah in my company, saya memang target nak ini lah, because of age factor..ya, private company ia tak akan accept orang yang sudah over age kan, ia mahu yang muda. ...memang sekarang ini susah, banyak competition. ...promotion dekat sini very hard now sebab ramai staff yang berijazah. ...and then maybe company look for the younger staff.*

[My plan was to get promotion in my company, that was my target, because of age factor...yes...in a private company they may not want to accept elder employee, they want younger staff.. promotion is difficult now, a lot of competition...promotion here is very difficult now because many staff are graduates...and then maybe the company also prefer the younger staff.]

KL16 did not expect a promotion with his degree because competition was stiff in the private sector with many employees being degree holders.

KL16: I don't think so about the promotion...more confident to face customers. Actually in our working environment,...about 80 per cent of my colleagues are degree holders....80 to 90 percent.

Job Security

From Table 3, in general most of the participants felt that having a degree has enhanced their job security. Out of 69 participants who responded, 49 of them (71%) agreed that with a degree, their jobs were more secured. Most of them were from the public sector.

KL12: *Lebih terjamin, sekarang saya sudah ada ijazah itu, jadi saya rasa saya sudah lega.*

[More secured, now I have that degree, I feel relieved.]

KL15: *Saya rasa lebih terjamin dan saya rasa saya juga lebih diberi peluang,.. majikan banyak memberi peluang berbanding dengan orang-orang yang tak ada ijazah.*

[I feel more secured and I also feel that I am given more opportunities...my employer has given out more opportunities compared to those without a degree.]

However, 20 participants (29%) had the view that a degree did not necessarily lead to job security. It was not a matter of having a degree or otherwise. For those working in the government sector, their jobs are generally secured. Even without a degree they still can keep their jobs.

KL17: *Saya sebagai pegawai polis, tak semestinya ada degree, kerja memang terjamin*

[I am a police officer, it is not necessary to have a degree, the job is secured.]

PP64: *Perkhidmatan awam ini memang macam itu lah (terjamin)*

[Public services is like that (job is secured).]

In the private sector, some participants felt that a degree provided job security in the sense that it increased their employability.

PK34: *Bila kita sudah ada kelulusan, kita ada experience, kalau kita nak kerja dekat tempat lain, kita mungkin diterima lagi lah. Mungkin sebagai backup, mungkin kalau terjadi apa-apa kepada majikan sekarang.*

[When we have the qualification, we have the experience, if we want to look for a job somewhere else, most probably we will be accepted. Maybe as a backup, just in case should anything happen to the current employer.]

PP06: *Ya, ya, memang saya confident lah, memang saya rasa dengan segulung ijazah ini, bukan kata di sini, di mana-mana saja saya boleh cari makan lah, tak ada masalah. So, ...saya rasa saya buat satu pilihan yang tepat lah untuk melanjutkan pelajaran di USM.*

[Yes, yes, I am more confident, with the scroll, it is not only here but somewhere else, I should be able to get a job, no problem. So...I think I made the right choice to further my study at USM.]

On the other hand, in the private sector, out of 12 participants, about 50% of them felt that a degree might not contribute to their job security. Some participants felt that a degree might not be enough for job security as it was already too common for people to have a degree nowadays. Some felt that it was no longer secure with merely a degree. They felt that they needed to better themselves by continuing their post-graduate studies.

KL07: 'Yes, *ramai* (many) even clerks also have degree'
'Yes. That is why you feel that diploma is like SPM (O-level) now'.
'Degree is now like a diploma, now you want to aim for a Masters degree, which is equivalent to *ijazah* (degree). ...definitely because I did a survey here, *tak ramai yang ada* (not many have) masters *lah di sini* (here), I think less than 15 or 20 of them, so *dengan segulung ijazah sarjana* (with a scroll of Masters degree), you will feel more secured and competition is not so stiff,...

Another participant felt that job security depended on the employer. She found her employer did not bother whether her staff had a degree or not. Thus, she did not feel that her job was more secured after getting her degree.

KL09: *Tak rasa lebih terjamin, ...sebab it depends on the company's culture, so this company's culture, ...tak appreciate staff yang ada higher qualification.*
Ya, ...saya sendiri yang melanjutkan pelajaran untuk kebaikan diri, ...kalau tidak, sama level dengan group lain yang tak ada qualification.
[I don't feel more secured...because it depends on the company's culture, so this company's culture, ...does not appreciate staff who has higher qualification. Yes...I further my studies for my own good,...if not, will be at the same level as the rest without higher qualification.]

KCG2 stated that getting a degree may not provide job security as it depended on the needs of the department that she was in.

KCG02: Ia tak semestinya (lebih terjamin), ia tengok keperluan jabatan lah. Dan saya merasakan sehingga satu peringkat kan, ilmu itu lebih penting, so untuk self improvement. Seperti saya berkata kan, kalau saya tak dapat jawatan di kumpulan A pun, saya happy dengan jawatan sekarang, selepas dapat ijazah, jawatan di sini pun sudah bersyukur lah.

[Not necessary more secured. It depends on the needs of the department. And I feel when we reach a certain stage, knowledge is more important, for self improvement. Like what I have said, if I do not get the post in Group A, I am happy with my current post, after getting my degree, I should be grateful to get a post here.]

Discussion

A general overview of the findings revealed that the DE degree obtained from the SDE has led to career enhancement among the participants. Available research in the field of DE attests to this (Demiray, 2000; Fahy, Spencer and Halinski, 2008; Martin et al., 2010). It confirms the fact that DE degrees can lead to job promotions, a pay rise and greater job responsibilities. Although obtaining a degree did not bring about job change to most of them (90%), more than 55% of the participants have been promoted in their jobs. This is congruent to the findings of Lockee, Moore and Burton (2002) who related job promotions to the success of the DE programme. The analysis also indicated that job promotions meant an increase in responsibilities as vouched by 65% of them. Moreover, their degree also led to job security as stated by 71% of them. A closer scrutiny of the findings reveals that there is a slight difference in the impact of the DE degree on career enhancement between those in the public and those in the private sectors in Malaysia. As demonstrated in Table 2, 78 participants were from the public sector while only 12 of them from the private sector. Out of the 78 participants, 39 of them were teachers.

In examining the impact of the degree on teachers' career enhancement, an interesting pattern can be discerned. Teachers in the government sector are ranked according to their salary grades ranging from DG29 to DG41. For instance, teachers in a primary school can be either college or university trained. The only difference is in their salaries that are

determined by their academic qualifications. They are eligible for salary increment if they are successful in their interviews. In most instances, government employees enjoy salary increments. A promotion therefore, means salary increment rather than a job change and vice-versa. It can be implied that the nature of the degree, whether obtained conventionally or via DE is immaterial as long as it is recognised by the government. As far as teaching responsibilities are concerned, they seem to be the same as those without a degree. However, they are given more duties namely in holding administrative posts like subject head and examination board head. A probable reason for this is that as degree holders, they are viewed to be capable and confident in handling any duty assigned to them. As for the fourth factor, job security, many of them (29%) are of the view that being in the government sector itself guarantees job security. This comes as no surprise as working as a government employee in Malaysia provides numerous perks such as free government hospital benefits, a pensionable scheme, gratuity and low interest loans. Many viewed these benefits as measures of job security. The findings of the current study affirmed this fact, that it is not the degree but the work sector that ensured job security.

A similar pattern can be charted among other government employees such as those in the police force and customs department. The only difference that could be determined was job promotion itself. Like teachers, they do not undergo a job change after obtaining their degree. However, job promotion involves a change in rank and salary. For example, after graduating, a police inspector can apply to be an ASP (assistant superintendent of police), which means a rise in rank and also salary. Job responsibilities differ with the new ranking. The interview statements of participants who are employees at KTM (Malayan Railways) and DBKL (Kuala Lumpur Municipal Council) also attested to this. Their jobs now involved more commitment and decision-making. Furthermore, like teachers these government employees found their jobs to be secured.

However, the impact of the DE degree on career enhancement of private sector employees seemed to vary from that of the public sector. From the job promotion perspective, only 50% of the 12 participants who were working in the private or semi-government sector were promoted. It is obvious that promotion does not come automatically when employees obtain their degree. This is mainly due to stiff competition as many employees were degree holders. In fact, some participants felt the need to better themselves by pursuing their Master degree. It is common

knowledge that in the private sector, an employee's merit is generally measured by his/her work-related knowledge and skills, communication capabilities and interpersonal relationships. Job security is therefore not guaranteed due to the competition with other employees as well as the high expectations of employers. As far as job responsibilities are concerned, a promotion demands greater commitment and accountability to the company or firm.

Conclusion

In short, it is apparent from this study that degrees offered by SDE have contributed to career development and progress. Although they did not lead to a job change in the majority of cases, they led to job promotions, notably in the public sector. Government employees' promotion and their job security are practically guaranteed unlike their private sector counterparts who face stiff competition for promotions. Moreover, in many instances promotions are based on performance rather than paper qualifications in the private sector. Having analysed this, a closer inspection of the data revealed that the DE degree does not differ from conventional degrees as far as job change, promotions, responsibilities and security are concerned. It is in fact, on par with other degrees. This augured well for the School of Distance Education, USM as it demonstrated the value of its degrees in the job market.

References

- Ab. Rasid Mat Zin, Rozhan Mohammed Idrus, Ahmad Hj Mohamad, Ibrahim Jaafar, Misni Surif, M. Khalid Taib, Kntayya Mariappan and Hashim Othman. 2003. Evaluation of course delivery and learning support of the distance education academic programme at Universiti Sains Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Distance Education* 5(2): 77–88.
- Daing Zaidah Ibrahim. 2003. Self-directed learning in distance education: A qualitative study. Paper presented at the 17th AAOU Annual Conference, Bangkok, 12–14 November.
- Davidson-Shivers, G. V., K. Inpornjivit and K. Seller. 2004. Using alumni and students databases for program evaluation and planning. *College Students Journal* 38(4): 510–520.
- Delany, A. M. 2002. Discovering success strategies through alumni research. Paper presented at the Annual Forum for the Association for Institutional Research, Toronto, Ontario.

- Demiray, U. 2000. Positions of distance education graduates in the job market: A case study of open education faculty graduates in Turkey. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education* 1(2): 145–156.
- Fahy, P. J., B. Spencer and T. Halinski. (2008). The self-reported impact of graduates' program completion on the careers and plans of graduates. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education* 9(1): 76–93.
- Keegan, D. 1996. *Foundations of distance education*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.
- Lockee, B., M. Moore and J. Burton. 2002. Measuring success: Evaluation strategies for distance education. *Educause quarterly* 1: 20–26.
- . 2001. Old concerns with new distance education research. *Educause quarterly* 2: 60–62.
- Martin, A. J., J. Milne-Home, J. Barret, E. Spalding and G. Jones. 2010. Graduate satisfaction with university and perceived employment preparation. *Journal of Education and Work* 13(2): 199–213.
- Moore, M. 1972. Learner autonomy: The second dimension of independent learning. *Convergence* 15(2): 76–88.
- Morshidi Sirat, S. H. Yen and Rosni Bakar. 2010. The impact of the economic crisis on higher education in Malaysia. Regional Seminar on the Impact of the Economic Crisis on Higher Education and the Use of ICT in Universities in Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok. 30 June – 2 July 2010.
- Rossi, P. H., H. E. Freeman and M. W. Lipsey. 1999. *Evaluation: A systematic approach*. Newbury Park, C: Sage.
- Rovai, A. P. 2003. A practical framework for evaluating online distance education programs. *Internet and Higher Education* 6: 109–124.
- Russell, T. L. 1999. *No significant difference phenomenon*. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina State University.
- Willis, B. 1993. *Instructional development for distance education*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University.