

Online Education and the Job Market: A Case Study from India

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Abstract

The focus of the paper is to elucidate the level of acceptance of online graduates in the job market. This is in view of the fact that fresh graduates from the traditional teaching (F2F) and traditional distance education programmes are both facing very steep competition to get employment and be accepted in the job market. The study also focuses on the usefulness of the degrees obtained by the learners in terms of getting employment, promotion, continuing education and other related opportunities. The findings of the study are based on the responses from 37 sample graduates. It was found that the majority of the respondents successfully obtained employment despite facing problems of non-acceptability at the initial stage. Some were successfully accepted to further their study or enhancing their skills through various short courses.

Abstrak

Fokus kertas kerja ini ialah untuk melihat paras penerimaan graduan atas talian dalam pasaran kerja. Ini adalah kerana graduan daripada pembelajaran bersemuka dan program pendidikan jarak jauh kedua-duanya menghadapi persaingan yang hebat untuk memperolehi pekerjaan dan diterima dalam pasaran kerja. Kajian ini juga memfokus kepada kepentingan ijazah yang telah diperolehi oleh pelajar dalam memperolehi pekerjaan, kenaikan pangkat, pembelajaran berterusan dan peluang-peluang berkaitan yang lain. Dapatan kajian berasaskan kepada maklum balas daripada 37 orang graduan didapati bahawa majoriti koresponden berjaya memperolehi pekerjaan walaupun menghadapi masalah ketidakpenerimaan pada peringkat awal. Beberapa orang pula berjaya diterima untuk melanjutkan pelajaran dan mempertingkatkan kemahiran melalui pelbagai kursus jangka pendek.

Introduction

Education is an important factor to enhance the individual's economic growth and contribute to the achievement of the national development and social objectives targeted by a country. This issue has been debated many times in both developing and developed countries where a large number of fresh graduates is unemployed. The nature of linkage between the job market and graduate supply from any mode of education assumes great significance in a study of the trends in the development of higher education. On the other hand, there is also possibility of mismatch between the demand and supply of manpower in an economy. International Labor Office (ILO) reports have stated that unemployed people looking for work available in the world totalled 185.9 million in 2003 in comparison to 185.4 million in 2002. The number has increased marginally in all the continents, but the situation in South Asia has remained stable during this period.

The situation in India has also not been affected to any great extent. The unemployment rate has not changed much despite the 5.1% GDP growth rate (ILO, 2003). However, the 55th Round (1999-2000) Survey of NSSO found that the absolute number of unemployment as well as the incidence of unemployment as a percentage of the labour force had increased (GOI, 2003). The unemployment rate increased to 7.32% in 1999-2000 from 5.99% in 1993-94. Our employment elasticity (the ability to generate jobs) went down from 0.52 in the 1980s to 0.16 in the late 1990s. Therefore, the graduate unemployment situation is also not too bright. The number of job seekers (all of whom not necessarily unemployed) registered with 939 employment exchanges in the country was 41.6 million during September 2002. From that number, 70% had qualifications up to the tenth standard and above, and 32% were aged between 20 to 24 years. Thus, the employment scenario shows that graduates (with degrees from the formal mode or traditional distance education) were not able to obtain employment. The focus of this study, however, is on the employment acceptability of graduates via online programmes.

The Online Programme IGNOU

The rapid development of the Internet has led to the establishment of online learning among higher education institutions in India. In view of

this trend, the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) introduced a virtual campus in September 1999 and subsequently offered the Bachelor of Information Technology (BIT) programme through the online delivery mode. This programme has been designed and developed keeping in view the changing market demands, particularly to meet the demands of multi-national companies entering the Indian market due to economic reforms in the last few years. In the BIT programme, innovative teaching methodologies using emerging technologies have been deployed with the emphasis on the empowerment of students. The teaching methods include the following:

- Live satellite-based teleconferencing lectures
- Recorded video lectures
- A computer laboratory
- Computer based training/tutorials (CBTs)
- Internet learning resources
- Online interactive chat peer groups, faculty members and experts

Tele-learning centres (TLCs) organise short duration orientations to train students to study courses through the above modes of delivery. A student in this programme is expected to be highly independent and be able to access learning resources via the web and participate in online interactions. The learning model is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 The learning model for BIT learners

Tri-mester	Live Satellite-Based lectures	Recorded video	Laboratory	CBTs	Internet learning resources	Internet Chat		
						With faculty	With peer group	With external experts
1st	35%	5%	35%	5%	4%	10%	4%	2%
2nd	25%	10%	25%	10%	5%	15%	5%	5%
3rd	10%	5%	20%	10%	15%	20%	10%	10%

Source: Prospectus of the BIT programme, 2003, IGNOU

Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted in the evaluation of graduate acceptance in the job market. For instance, Woodley (undated) examined the status of United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) graduates based on a sample of 3,046 graduates. The findings revealed that 24% of respondents obtained salary increments, 17% moved to new occupations and 36% were promoted and advanced in their careers to more specialised jobs within the same occupation. Gaba (1999, 2002) examined the acceptance of IGNOU degrees in the job market and found from 57% respondents who were on the job before joining to the IGNOU programme, about 30 % continued to further their education, and 16% obtained promotion and only 19 % of the respondents were in same post as before they enrolled the degree programme. Of the 13% who were unemployed before joining the IGNOU programme, about 50% furthered their education and 22% obtained jobs. Woodley & Simpson (1999) analysed the rates of return of UKOU graduates and found that these graduates were likely to be associated with increased earnings, the increase being greater for women than for men. Another study conducted at the Open University Hong Kong (OUHK) found that more than 90% of employers were satisfied with the continuous staff professional development offered by OUHK through the distance education mode (OUHK, 1999). A further OUHK (1999) report revealed that most of the respondents had the opinion that OUHK's open entry to university education was acceptable to them. In a related study about employer perception, Gaba (2002) found that employers perceived that IGNOU graduates performed satisfactorily and fulfilled their aspirations. Hackenberger & Egan (2003) similarly found that employers rated distance education graduates highly as they were well prepared to take their responsibilities after completion of their programme through the distance mode. From the above reviews, it is observed that open and distance learning is generally beneficial to both employers as well as graduates but the level of acceptability of these graduates in the job market is still not well understood. The present study is to investigate the acceptability of graduates in the job market.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to elucidate the level of acceptability of distance education graduates in the job market in terms of the learners' career path in employment, promotion and further studies. This study also aims to look at the perception related variables to measure views on the acceptability of their degrees in the job market.

Methodology

Structured questionnaires were administered through the post to 180 graduates who had successfully completed their studies. A total of 37 (about 21%) filled-in questionnaires were received from the learners. The demographic analysis of the questionnaires indicated that the majority of the respondents (89.2%) were female, all of these being from urban areas; 23 students (62%) were from Delhi. Most of them (86.5%) belonged to the 21-25 year-old age group while the rest were between 26-30 years of age. All the respondents were fresh unemployed learners who had acquired a 10+2 qualification from formal institutions before registration with the BIT programme.

In terms of computer usage and competency, about 90% of the respondents possessed their own computers. A total of 40.5% of the respondents had intermediate Internet skills before their registration with the BIT programme, 35.1% were beginners and 13.5% were experienced and conversant with the online environment.

Most of the respondents came from the middle income group, that is, earning Rs. 15,000 (US\$330) per month. The source of funding for the respondents was mainly their parents and very few of them were self-financing. It is therefore concluded that most of the respondents belong to middle class families, their parents were working in the service sector and were the main source of funding for the respondents to undertake the programme. The main objective of the respondents (35%) was to get jobs with better career prospects, while 27% of them enrolled in the programme out of interest. A total of 24% had particular occupations in mind before their enrolment.

Findings and Discussion

After graduation, 27% of the respondents obtained regular jobs while 24.3% were similarly employed while enrolled in postgraduate studies. On the other hand, 13.5% were unemployed but furthering their studies. In comparison, 10.8% were furthering their studies while holding part-time jobs, meanwhile the same number of respondents was unemployed and doing nothing. Figure 1 below illustrates the findings.

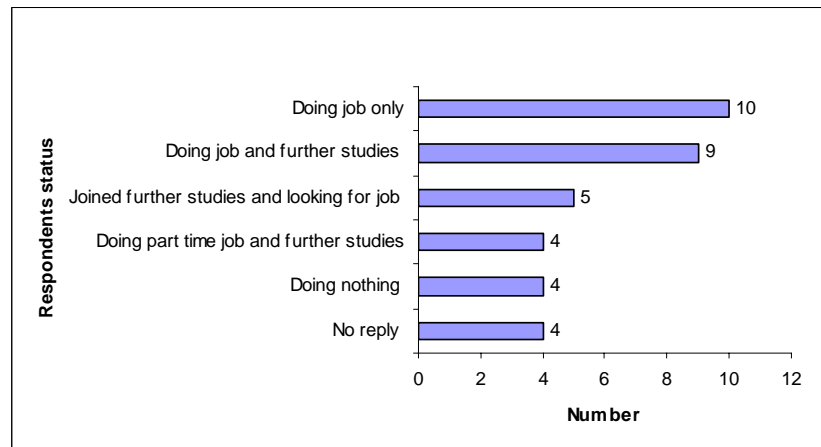


Figure 1 Respondents' status after obtaining online BIT degree

The respondents who secured regular and part-time jobs were working as software designers, digital coordinators and digital multimedia designers in private enterprises and the United Nations' Development Programme (UNDP). Ten respondents (27%) were getting salaries less than Rs. 5000 (US\$110) per month, five of them (13.5%) between Rs. 5001-10,000 (US\$111-220) per month while the same number of respondents was getting in between Rs.15,000 – Rs. 20,000 (US\$221-440) per month. Ten respondents (27%) were employed in enterprises or companies that employed about 101-125 staff members. Five of the respondents were employed in an enterprise/company with more than 150 staff members. The same number of respondents was also employed at a smaller enterprise/company with 41-50 staff members. It is clear that the respondents managed to secure employment in reputed enterprises/companies and were accepted by their respective employers.

Among the 23 respondents who secured full-time and part-time jobs, the following views were expressed:

- According to 54 % of the respondents, the BIT degree was one of the pre-requisites to obtain jobs.
- Most of them (27%) were neutral with the statements that the BIT programme helped them in getting jobs.
- 40.5% of the respondents “agreed” and 24.3% “strongly agreed” that the BIT programme enhanced their skills.
- Half of the respondent agreed that the programme helped them in their job performance.
- About 38% of the respondents “disagreed” and 24.3% “strongly disagreed” with the statement that due to the common grouping of the courses of the programme, they were able to get jobs.
- The majority of the respondents were “neutral”, “disagreed” and “strongly disagreed” that due to optional courses in the programme, they were able to get jobs.
- Most of the respondents “agreed” and “strongly agreed” that they were well aware of the content of this programme before enrolment.
- The majority of the respondents “disagreed” and “strongly disagreed” that due to this programme, they were able to manage and develop themselves for their present jobs.
- The majority of the respondents “agreed” (27%) and “strongly agreed” (13.6%) with the statement that due to this programme, they were able to work effectively as team members.
- A large number of the respondents “agreed” and “strongly agreed” that due to this programme, they were able to communicate in writing and participate in verbal and non-verbal communication.
- Most of the respondents “strongly disagreed” with the statement that this programme did not help them at all.

Details on the respondents' views regarding the effects of the BIT programme on their acceptability into the job market are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Respondents' views on the benefits of the BIT programme (in percentages)

Respondents' views	No reply	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
(a) The programme helped me in getting my job.	24.3	10.8	13.5	27.0	10.8	13.6	100.0
(b) The programme enhanced my skill.	10.8	24.3	-	-	40.5	24.4	100.0
(c) The programme helped me in my job performance.	10.8	24.3	13.6	13.5	24.3	13.5	100.0
(d) Due to the usefulness of the courses, I was able to get a job.	10.8	24.3	37.8	13.6	-	13.5	100.0
(e) Due to the nature of the optional courses, I was able to get a job.	24.3	24.3	10.8	27.0	13.6	-	100.0
(f) I was well aware of the content of this programme before enrolment.	10.8	-	13.5	24.3	37.8	13.6	100.0
(g) Due to this programme, I am able to manage and develop myself for the present job.	24.3	24.3	10.8	13.5	13.5	13.6	100.0

Table 2 (*continued*)

Respondents' views	No reply	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
(h) Due to this programme, I am able to work effectively as a team member.	24.3	24.3	10.8	-	27.0	13.6	100.0
(i) Due to this programme, I am able to communicate in writing and participate in verbal and non-verbal communication.	10.8	24.3	10.9	-	27.0	27.0	100.0
(j) This programme did not help me at all.	10.8	51.4	-	13.5	-	24.3	100.0

Note = (-) No response to this item.

Most of the respondents stated that they did not get better pay, promotion or a new job after obtaining BIT degrees. It is understandable because all the learners were fresh learners and had just graduated from a formal institution of learning and were unemployed. However, a few respondents (4) who were furthering their studies became self-employed after getting BIT degrees. It appears that getting online degrees was crucial and helpful for the graduates to become self-employed. It is also interesting to note that a majority of the students who had secured jobs and enrolled for further studies after graduation had revealed that they did not face any problems in getting the jobs or pursuing postgraduate studies in different institutions.

It is observed from the above analysis that studying through the online mode of delivery helped every respondent in some way. Even though the sample was small, the findings on the acceptability of the graduates by enterprises/companies cannot be ignored. The acceptability of the IGNOU online graduates is quite satisfactory. The courses offered by this programme have spilled over into the respondents' (employed) work environment. Its learning model and courses equip learners with necessary

technical skills to perform their jobs better. In other word, the programme has successfully imparted the required knowledge and skills required for its graduates to be effective and efficient workers. This is evident as most of the respondents revealed that they were able to get jobs because they were well equipped in information technology (IT) through the courses they attended. The general findings revealed by the present study are similar to those of earlier studies.

Conclusion

On the whole, online teaching has been breaking all barriers not only for people who do not have access to higher education programmes, but also for those who can earn while learning. Although this is a small and primarily limited study, the results show the level of acceptability of online graduates in the job market. In order, however, to obtain statistics regarding the conclusive acceptance of online graduates in the job market, a further detailed study is needed. Such a study should include a comparative study of the acceptance of graduates from face-to-face or traditional distance education programmes with those from online programmes.

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