
How Adult Online Graduates Portray Their Degree

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigated how adult graduates of online Bachelor's degree programs describe the online aspect of their degree. Online education is promoted as a method for adult students to access the benefits of a college degree. Therefore, it is important for prospective online students, higher education institutions and policy makers to understand how online degrees are valued in society and by online graduates. The primary method of data collection was interviews of 24 graduates. The setting of this study, a well-regarded research university primarily known for its traditional campus-based programs, helped to isolate perceptions of the online delivery modality. All participants in the study held a high opinion of their online degree and of the university. However, the participants also recognized that some people have a negative opinion of online degrees. The participants described two strategies for dealing with encounters with people with negative perceptions of online degrees. Slightly more than half of the participants were forthcoming and open about earning a degree online. However, a large minority of participants were concerned about negative perceptions of online degrees. These participants often did not volunteer information about the online aspect of their degree to other people unless specifically questioned. Additional research is recommended to further explain the extent to which perceptions of online degrees are associated with the online delivery mode rather than other factors and to investigate the effect of delivery mode and institution type on the economic impact of an earning a Bachelor's degree later in life.

Keywords: adult education, online education, higher education, qualitative research

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This study explored how adult graduates of online Bachelor's degree completion programs offered by a research university describe their degree to others. A particular focus was how these graduates portray the online aspect of their degree. Complementing prior studies that focus on how online graduates and online degrees are perceived by others, this study examined how the online degree is perceived from the perspective of the person that earned the degree.

Online education is often promoted as a method to provide adult students with access to the benefits of a Bachelor's degree. Therefore, an important issue for online students, higher education institutions and policy makers is how an online degree is perceived and valued in various sectors of society, including by the online graduates themselves.

Using a qualitative case study approach, 24 graduates, age 31 or older, were interviewed. The 24 participants were asked how the value of their degree was affected by earning the degree through online learning. In their responses, the participants described both how they themselves valued their degree as well as how they perceived that other people view online degrees. The participants also described their strategies for dealing with possible negative perceptions of online learning.

The article reviews previous studies on the perception of online degrees, describes the research method for the study and the specific context of the case, and presents the findings of the study. The implications of the research are discussed along with recommendations for future research.

Perceptions of Online Higher Education

Since the advent of online learning, questions have been raised about the value of an online degree relative to a degree earned through the traditional face to face classroom format. A number of studies

have established that an online education can be, and often is, as good as or better than a traditionally-delivered learning experience. A meta-analysis commissioned by the U. S. Department of Education of one thousand studies found that online learning has reached parity with or even superiority over traditionally delivered education (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia & Jones, 2010).

However, the perception of online learning is not always as positive as the parity with traditionally-delivered education described by Means et al. (2010) would suggest. Adams (2008a, 2008b) found that the acceptability of online degrees was less than traditionally-earned degrees in situations including business hiring, faculty hiring, health hiring, and graduate school and medical school admissions. Thompson (2009) similarly found that employers have a strong preference for graduates with traditional degrees. A literature review by Columbaro and Monaghan (2009) suggested that there is a marked stigma associated with online degrees in hiring and graduate school admissions situations.

The extent to which any negative perceptions associated with online degrees are linked to the perceived quality and rigor of the institutions granting the online degrees or to other factors is an open question. Since the participants in this study earned their degrees online from a well-regarded traditional bricks and mortar research university, this case provides an opportunity to explore if these graduates experience or perceive a stigma related their online degrees. A related question is if and how the participants in this study make it known that their degree was earned online, especially since the online dimension of the degree may not be obvious to someone evaluating a graduate's credentials due to the primarily traditional nature of the research university from which they were graduated.

Research Method and Setting

A qualitative case study approach was used to conduct this study. Qualitative approaches are appropriate when the object of a study is to understand the meaning of a phenomenon for those involved, as is the case here (Merriam, 2009). Case study method was selected from the family of qualitative approaches. The case study approach is ideal for interpretation in context, particularly in the field of education (Merriam, 1988).

The setting of the case study was a large private East Coast research university. The sample of 24 participants was recruited from a population of 97 graduates. This population consisted of students that were graduated from online Bachelor's degree programs between fall 2006 and summer 2010. Only students that were over age 30 at time of their graduation were included in the population.

The demographics of the 24 person sample were similar to the population overall. Over 70% of the participants interviewed completed a Bachelor of Science degree in General Studies. Other frequently earned degrees included the Bachelor of Science in Communications and Applied Technology and the Bachelor of Science in Psychology. The average age of the participants at time of graduation was 40, with a range of 31 to 55. Twenty-one of the 24 participants (88%) were working full time. Twenty of the 24 participants (83%) were parents. Of the 20 parents, 16 were part of a married couple.

Data was collected primarily through in-depth semi-structured telephone interviews of the participants conducted in January, February, and March 2012. The time lag between the students' dates of graduation and the date of the interview was purposeful to insure that the participant had some period of time to experience life with the addition of having earned a Bachelor's degree. The relevant interview prompts that elicited the data reported here were:

1. In what ways did the online aspect of the program affect the value of the degree to you?
2. How has the perception and reputation of the university affected the value of the degree to you?

The analysis of data was guided by the process described by Merriam (2009). This process sought to make meaning out of the data by finding themes through an iterative and initially inductive process of coding the data. As the analysis process proceeded, it became in part deductive as the researcher looked for data consistent with or at variance with the categories previously created. The themes that emerged from the process became the findings reported here.

To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms are used to identify the participants and universities referenced by

the participants in their interview responses. The large private East Coast research university from which the participants were graduated is identified as “Research U.” The participants also made unprompted references to several nationally marketed for profit universities, indicating that there was a strong association in the minds of the participants between online learning and these institutions. These institutions are identified collectively as “For Profit U.”

Findings

Consistent with previous studies that found positive outcomes for adult college students (McLaughlin, 2010; Mishler, 1983; Sandmann, 2010; West & Hore, 1989a, 1989b), all 24 participants interviewed expressed overall satisfaction with the outcome of earning their degree. All participants described the convenience and flexibility of online study as important contextual and environmental factors that allowed them to complete their degree. In addition, all participants described the prestigious reputation of Research U. as a significant source of value.

Participant views were mixed as to whether there is a stigma associated with earning a degree online. A large minority (11 of 24 [46%]) of participants expressed concern that there was a stigma associated with earning a degree online. In turn, how the participants in this study perceived that significant people in their worlds viewed online degrees was an important factor that affected how the participants represented the online aspect of their degree to others. While some participants considered the online aspect of their degree to be a source of pride, others kept it undisclosed unless specifically questioned. Participants often expressed the opinion that any negative perceptions associated with online degrees were or should be greatly reduced or eliminated in their case since their degree was conferred by Research U.

Institutional Reputation as Source of Value to These Online Graduates

Participants frequently commented that the reputation of Research U. was a major motivating factor in enrolling in an online program at Research U. and continued to be a major source of value after the participants had been graduated. For example, when asked how the perception and reputation of Research U. affected the value of his degree, George responded, “A thousand percent. I wouldn’t have taken an online program if it wasn’t with somebody with a reputable name like Research U.” When Olivia was asked if the perception and reputation of Research U. affected the value of the degree, she said, “Yes. Yes. Definitely, definitely it did. I wouldn’t have gone ... we knew there were other options in [the area] for sure. I chose Research U. because I like their reputation.” Walt said, “It was a good reputable university, which is what drew me to Research U.” Similarly, Larry, referring to Research U.’s reputation said, “It was the single most important thing. ... Absolutely, it was key.”

Nancy emphasized how other people viewed her degree, stating, “Well, Research U. is very prestigious. People recognize that it is the same as an in-class degree. There’s just no question...” Referring to a conversation in a job interview, this participant said, “And when they saw ‘Research U.’ it was like sit up and take notice. ... They were like, ‘Wow. ... We need people like you.’” Walt also commented on the positive reaction he gets when he describes his degree from Research U:

I think that the reputation precedes itself of who Research U. is, or what it is. The majority of people, when I tell them I have a degree from Research U., they’re like, “Oh, wow. Excellent.” It’s a great school.

Dale cited the importance to him of earning a degree from an established university with a physical campus:

For me, one of the real important pieces, one of the things that I think is great about Research U.’s [online] program is that it’s Research U., which is a bricks-and-mortar school that has a great reputation to begin with. When you finish, you get the same degree that you would have as if you went to the full-time bricks-and-mortar campus. For me, that connection was really important.

How Participants Portray the Online Aspect of Their Degree

Thirteen of the 24 participants (54%) did not express concern about negative perceptions of online higher education. However, 11 of the 24 participants (46%) did express concern about the perception of online

degrees. These participants did not reveal the online aspect of their degree program to others unless specifically questioned.

Online proud. A slight majority of the participants did not express concerns about how online degrees are perceived. Some of these participants actively celebrated the online aspect of their degree. These participants often expressed the conviction that learning online is more difficult than learning in a more structured classroom setting and a belief that quality of the institution from which they earned their degree counteracted any stigma that might otherwise be associated with online degree programs. In addition, some participants suggested that as online degrees become more commonly offered by traditional well-respected universities, any stigma associated with online degrees will decrease.

While other participants in the study hid the online aspect of their degree program from view, the participants in the majority group often expressed pride in the online aspect of their degree program. One such participant was Harriet. When asked how she represents the online aspect of her degree to others, Harriet said, "I tell them that I did it online because, quite honestly, it's a lot harder to do classes online than to go to class every day just because you need to have that self-discipline." When asked whether she felt that an online degree carried any negative associations, Harriet said:

No. I think maybe in the beginning there was because you would always see these strange colleges you have never heard of ... I think when it comes from a good school with a good reputation I don't see why the education would be any less than physically being in the classroom. ... I definitely think the reputation of the school has a lot to do with it. I think more colleges now are having online classes. Bigger universities.

Karl recalled initial concerns about online degree programs at the time of his enrollment, stating: I guess up front I was skeptical that an online degree would have the same rigor that a bricks and mortar earning of a degree would. That was one of the first questions I asked, "Will my degree say Research U. Online or something like that?"

When asked how he represents his degree now, Karl said: I let them know [that I took my degree online]. There's certainly none of the embarrassment or anything on my part that feels like [that] because I know the quality of an online degree from a reputable institution. The only people that might look down on that it's simply out of ignorance as far as I'm concerned. I have no problem. I tell people that I earned my degrees, both my Bachelor's and my Master's, through distance learning programs. They were high quality. ... I can tell you it's much harder online.

Several participants noted skepticism in the world about online degrees, but felt that earning a degree from a prestigious university such as Research U. counteracted any stigma. As Larry explained: I have no problems with folks that I meet in describing where I learned, where I studied, the university. I'm very proud of it. People are mostly surprised that Research U. offers a program online. I kind of like that. It's not heavily marketed. It probably is in certain areas, probably more so in the mid-Atlantic. It's not diluted. People aren't making a judgment, "Oh, you learned online" and there's a perception automatically from people. When you say you received a university degree online at Research U. it's almost like the eyes open up and go, "Really? That's pretty stout. I can't believe they offer [an online] program at Research U. You've done so well at Research U. That's tremendous." It holds a little more value, I think. The identity is a lot stronger than some of the other programs that we're all familiar with in the U.S.

Ursula described the conversations she has about her online degree: I feel that sometimes can be the reality [a negative perception], depending on the school. I feel that, with Research U., it definitely was not the case. I feel like I was challenged, I feel like I was held to a higher standard than some schools hold their students in a face-to-face context. And I feel like most people when they talk to me walk away knowing that Research U. does that.

Stan described how he represents the online aspect of his degree in the context of his entire life journey, stating, "I'm fully transparent with that. I talk about my entire background from leaving school early to starting a business to finishing my degree to switching careers."

If they don't ask, I don't tell. A large minority of participants expressed concern about negative perceptions of a degree earned online. While some of these participants questioned the underlying assumption that the mode of educational delivery was or should be considered important, they also indicated a hesitancy to volunteer that they earned their degree online. The somewhat conflicted views of these participants are illustrated by the following participant comments.

When asked about the value of an online degree, Iris said:

I don't see where that's relevant, because there's not a place on a job application that says, "Did you get your degree online or did you go to a traditional classroom setting?" You know how it says what your degrees are? So you just check it off. So nobody really knows that unless you tell them.

Quentin, a graduate working in IT that subsequently earned two Master's degrees, was asked how he represented the online aspect of his Bachelor's degree from Research U. He replied:

I do keep it under wraps. I don't go into the details about how I earned my degree. ... I think, just in general, people lump the online experience with, like, For Profit U. type of perception. ... People ask you where you completed your undergraduates – Research U. – but you don't go into a lot of detail about your undergraduates. More so, you do about your post graduate work.

Walt, another graduate working in IT, said:

Typically, I don't know if a lot of people I converse with have a negative connotation to online, but I try not to bring it up. That's only for my own purposes just because I don't want to allude to the fact that it was online. If people ask me, I'll be like, "Yeah, I did it online." ... But the fact is that I don't come right out and say it just because of the negative connotation. ... That's kind of the reason why, the program I chose, I wanted to make sure it didn't have the "online" on there. It was a degree from Research U. Does that make sense?

Many participants contrasted Research U. with large, heavily advertised for profit universities. Some believed that getting a degree from Research U. immunized them against online prejudice that they associated with the large for profit universities. Rick said:

Being in this area, I could have went to For Profit U., I could have went to a couple of those other ones ... Research U. just holds so much more clout when you put that on your resume. You see, Research U., it doesn't matter what the grade is, it's Research U. It's an outstanding university in the area. That's the way I look at it. It was like a no-brainer to me. That's why I chose going to Research U. over a couple of the other schools.

When considering online programs, George recalled being concerned about the perception of earning a degree online, but expressed confidence in an online degree from Research U., saying:

I thought, "Of any online class, Research U. has a credible name." or the credible online experience as opposed to going – what's the one online college that's escaping my mind right now that does a lot of advertising, I think they just do an online college? Mainly, the reason would just be the credibility of the Research U. degree, and that's the reason I wanted Research U.

However, this participant still expressed reservations about the perceptions of an online degree stating:

Yeah, I think there's still probably somewhat of a negative connotation with that [an online degree], so I don't think I would advertise that it was an online experience, for that reason. If somebody says, "Oh, where's your degree from?" I would say, "Research U." I wouldn't say "Research U. online."

When asked why she had chosen Research U. over alternatives, Fernanda replied that a Research U. degree would be favored over a degree from a for profit university in hiring situations, stating:

I think Research U. has a higher name, a bigger name. If you were to go to a For Profit U., if you were going to go apply for a job with someone who goes to For Profit U. and Research U., I'm sure that the Research U. degree weighs more than the For Profit U. degree.

Nancy said, "Now, For Profit U., people are like, 'That's not really a degree.' But when you see Research U.'s name on it, it's their stamp of approval. It's the same as if you were sitting in a classroom."

Discussion

This study examined how adult graduates of online Bachelor's degree completion programs offered by a large private research university describe the online aspect of their educational experience to others. The participants in this study universally viewed their academic programs to be rigorous and their degrees to be of equal or greater educational value to a degree earned on campus at a well-regarded traditional university, and of superior value to degrees earned at what they perceived to be lesser universities. However, some participants were fully transparent when it came to discussing the online aspect of their degree with other people, while other participants chose to keep the online aspect of their degree undisclosed unless specifically questioned on this point.

Online learning is potentially the ideal way for working adult students to complete a Bachelor's degree due to the convenience and flexibility that online learning offers. Despite general consensus among experts that online learning can be as effective as classroom learning (Means et al., 2010), online degrees have been shown to be devalued in hiring and other situations important to adult students (Adams, 2008a, 2008b; Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009; Thompson, 2009). Consistent with the research, the consensus view of the participants in this case study was that, based on their first-hand experience, online degrees, at least from the research university they attended, are quite legitimate and worthy of respect, but are not universally seen this way by others. The participants believed that the reputation of the research university helped legitimize their online degrees, indeed this was a primary motivation for enrolling at the research university. There also was consensus that as more people have experience with online learning and online learners over time, the perception of online learning will improve, or at least become more nuanced in the same way that people hold opinions of various degrees when it comes to a university's traditional classroom programs.

The main differences among the participants were in the strategies used to respond to possible encounters with negative perceptions of online degrees. To some extent, this dichotomy may reflect differences in how the two groups of students value external validation of their degrees relative to self-satisfaction with their degrees. A slight majority of participants did not have any hesitance about telling other people about the online aspect of their degrees. Indeed, members of this "online proud" group acknowledged that some people may devalue online degrees, but this did not devalue the degree to the graduate. A member of this latter group characterized those that devalued online degrees as doing so "out of ignorance" and expressed that an online degree is worthy of respect because "it's much harder" to earn a degree online.

A large minority of the participants in this study was concerned about the perception of online degrees and preferred that the online aspect of their degrees remain obscured. These graduates found value not only in the overall reputation of the research university granting the degree, but also in the fact that the institution was primarily a traditional bricks and mortar institution and that, as a result, some people would assume that their degree was earned in the classroom.

In the near term, traditional universities offering online degree programs can provide value to students and perhaps drive enrollments by closely associating their online programs with their campus programs and by not differentiating online graduates on diplomas or transcripts. Over the longer term, in order to encourage respect for online learning, institutions of all types may wish to consider increased use of strategies to help online graduates demonstrate learning in addition to the degree credential itself, such as portfolios that expose academic work artifacts to employers and graduate schools and use of objective measures of performance, such as standardized examinations, where appropriate.

Opportunities for Future Research

Research studies reporting negative perceptions of online degrees are not clear on the extent to which other factors interact with online delivery in driving perceptions of online degrees. Important considerations in future research on the perceptions of online degrees may include the reputation of the institution granting the online degree, the experience level with online graduates of the person expressing the opinion, and characteristics of the graduates themselves such as age and career trajectory prior to earning their degree. Consideration of these factors will help explain to what extent perceptions of online degrees are determined by the online delivery mode, the reputation of the degree granting institution, ignorance, or general characteristics of adult college students unrelated to mode of delivery.

This qualitative study was not designed to address the question of whether an online degree earned from a

private research university is more valuable than classroom degrees or degrees from other types of institutions as measured by objective economic variables such as pay differential or degree of upward career mobility. Accordingly, additional research is suggested to determine the differential economic impact on adult graduates of a Bachelor's degree based on mode of delivery or type of institution granting the degree. This research would be useful to higher education administrators, policy makers, and adult students considering university enrollment.

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