
Attitudes of Prospective Human Resource Personnel towards Distance Learning Degrees

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Abstract

This study investigated the attitudes of Prospective Human Resource Personnel toward degrees obtained by distance learning in comparison to those obtained through conventional degree program. Using a cross-sectional survey design, a total of 215 postgraduates students who had been or had potentials to be involved in the hiring process in their organizations participated in this study. Research findings showed less favorable attitudes to degrees obtained via distance learning. Results also showed significant differences in perceived employment utility between comparable degrees obtained via distance learning and those obtained via conventional degree program. Gender, work experience, age and knowing distance learning graduates did not have significant effects on respondents' attitudes. Type of education (HND vs B.Sc) however had a significant effect on perceived utility of degree for gaining employment and achieving success on the job.

Introduction

Higher education via distance learning is expanding in scope and use of information and communication technology. In many parts of the world, there have been expansions of distance education and online academic program. In the United States of America for example, there are over 170 accredited institutions that offer online Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees in many disciplines (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009). The past two decades in Nigeria has also witnessed an increase in distance education program. Many institutions, realizing that the spaces available for students are grossly inadequate compared to the number of qualified applicants, have adopted distance education program to reach out to more students. Consequently the growth in the number of distance learning programs has been explosive with a large number of staff and students involved. The Federal government also re-opened the National Open University of Nigeria in 2000 with the mandate to expand the delivery of higher education for improved access to the teeming number of people seeking higher education.

In distance education, the teacher and students are separated by distance and sometimes by time and consequently requires an artificial communication medium that will deliver information and provide a channel of interaction between them (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Since its early days as correspondence studies and transformation to external degree program, nontraditional degree program or distance education, the objective has been to increase accessibility of higher education among those who are less educationally privileged. The ideal situation is that while reaching a large audience, quality is not compromised. However, many of the distance learning program have problems with program focus and structuring of course offerings (Husmann & Miller, 2005). Indeed for many institutions offering distance education, the motive tends to be primarily related to revenue generation rather than altruism. Thus, many of the program are viewed as 'diploma mills' offering substandard program compared to the quality of education in the conventional or traditional system of education.

Are there any significant differences in the quality of degrees obtained through distance education and conventional program? Previous research studies have not found significant differences in the performance of students from both program (e.g., Ojo and Olukulehin, 2006). Saba (2001) observed that although researchers continue to conduct comparative studies of distance education and face-to-face instruction, they tend to reveal no significant difference in learning outcomes and achievement between the various forms of instruction. A study conducted by Ojo and Olukulehin (2006), using 120 Open and Distance Learning students showed that students had a more positive attitude and perception of distance learning compared to traditional forms of higher education.

However, what is the acceptance level of distance education in general? As Adams and DeFleur (2005) observed, only a handful of the numerous distance education program are fully accredited or taught by recognized universities. In a study involving analysis of literature on the perceptions of the quality and value of external degrees over twenty five years, Puffer (2005) observed that although graduates report a high degree of satisfaction with their educational experience and employers accept external degrees, employers favour degrees offered by traditional institutions over those offered by for-profit providers. Further, the analysis revealed that the academy remains polarized, with "traditional" faculty distrustful of credentials earned through non-traditional study. Also, in a recent study which investigated the perceptions of five hundred human resource directors about online credentials earned by K-12 principals and principal candidates, the majority of respondents expressed beliefs that online courses and online degrees aimed at school principals required less work, were of lower quality and could not adequately prepare leaders to tackle state-specific issues (Richardson, McLeod and Dikkers, 2011).

Employers, human resource personnel or hiring "gatekeepers" are important stakeholders in distance education as their hiring decisions and practices impact on the utility of the credentials obtained through distance learning. Hiring "gatekeepers" are persons such as receptionists, human resource recruiters, and resume screeners who stand between job seekers and those who want to hire them (Mitchell 2003; Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009). Given the expansion of distance education, the viability of distance education and the future prospects of its graduates depend to a considerable extent on the perceived utility or instrumentality of the credentials in terms of obtaining jobs or gaining entry into higher level degree program. Despite the apparent increasing support for distance education nationwide? What are the attitudes of the employers, human resource personnel or hiring "gatekeepers" to distance education? How are degrees obtained through distance learning viewed compared to those of traditional or conventional program? This study seeks to examine attitudes toward distance education credentials and the extent to which graduates of distance education experience discrimination in employment opportunities among potential human resource personnel or hiring gatekeepers. Therefore, the following research questions were addressed in this paper:

1. What is the attitude of prospective human resource personnel towards degrees obtained via distance education?
2. Are there gender differences in the attitudes toward distance education?
3. Are there significant differences between respondents who knew students on distance learning program and those who did not?
4. Do age and work experience have significant relationships with attitude towards degrees obtained by distance education?
5. Are there significant differences in perceptions of the utility of degrees for graduates with comparable academic qualifications from a distance education program and conventional system of education?
6. Are there significant relationships between attitudes toward distance learning degrees and respondents' perception of differentials in skills of graduates of distance education and those of conventional program?

Method

The research is a survey which adopted a cross-sectional design. Data was collected from the population of prospective human resource personnel or hiring gatekeepers at a single point in time.

Sample

The respondents for this research consisted of 215 postgraduate students from three different Departments of the University of Ibadan. The candidates were students of program offering courses related to Human Resource management therefore enhancing their potential to be prospective Human Resource Personnel or hiring "gatekeepers" in their organizations. They consisted mainly of students who were employed but undertaking graduate programs in specialties such as Personnel Psychology, Managerial Psychology, Industrial and 5 Relations, Legal, Criminological and Security Psychology.

Ninety two (43%) of the respondents were females while 123 (57%) were males. Their ages ranged from 21 to 54 years with a mean of 35.5 years (SD=6.26). One hundred and ninety two (90.6%) of the respondents were employed while 14 (9.4%) were not. Of those employed 113 (55.4%) had been involved in recruitment exercises in their organizations. In general, 14 (7%) were junior staff, 58 (29%) were intermediate, 100 (50%) were senior staff and 27 (13.5%) were management staff. One respondent (0.5%) was retired. The respondents' length of service ranged from 1 to 35 years with a mean of 8.3 years (SD=6.67).

In terms of respondents' exposure to distance learning program, 190 (89.6%) had never registered for any distance learning program while 22 (9%) had registered for degree or certificate distance learning program and 3 (1.4%) did not provide any information. When asked if they knew anyone undergoing distance learning program, 144 (67%) indicated they did while 54(25%) did not. Seventeen respondents (7.9%) did not respond. Respondents who knew people undertaking distance learning program indicated that 43.1% were friends, 42.3% were co-workers while 13.9% were family members.

Instrument

Vignettes. To measure perceived utility of credentials of distance education in terms of gaining employment into entry-level jobs in comparison with credentials obtained through the conventional or traditional system of education, "vignette-based" questions, also known as the "scenario-based survey method" were adopted. This measure reflects respondents'

perceptions of the usefulness of a degree for employment and the capability of gaining employment and performing successfully on the job. In vignettes, hypothetical situations are presented to respondents who are required to respond and make assessments in ways that reflect their disposition towards the scenario. In this study two specific and similar scenarios were presented to each respondent thus:

Jide and Lanre are both 25-year old male graduates of the University of Ibadan. Jide obtained his degree in July 2009 with a Second Class Upper Division in Economics via the Distance Learning program. Lanre who also obtained his degree in July 2009 with a Second Class Upper Division in Economics went through the conventional or regular degree program.

To this vignette each respondent was requested to rate Jide (with distance education degree) and Lanre (with degree obtained from conventional or traditional degree program) on six dimensions relating to perceived utility of credentials: employability, competence, potential job performance, potential for success, potential for career growth and potential for long service. The purpose was to measure respondents' perceptions about job placement skills of graduates of distance education and conventional system who have Bachelor's degree for entry-level positions. On each of the six dimensions, respondents were requested to rate Jide and Lanre separately on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (lowest score) to 5 (highest score). The differences between the scores ascribed to graduates of traditional or conventional degree and distance learning degree program on each of the six dimension reflect perceived differentials on the skills.

Attitude questions. The third section of the questionnaire consisted of items designed to measure respondents' attitudes towards degrees obtained through distance learning program. The questions were 15 attitude statements to which respondents were asked to respond on 5-point Likert format ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). The items were generated from literature and through preliminary interviews with ten employees in the public and private sectors who were not involved in the main study. The initial pool of twenty three items were subjected to face validity using five experts and further reduced to fifteen items. The item total correlation of the fifteen items ranged from .571 to .782 ($p < .01$). Only one item (6) showed a relatively low but weak correlation with the total score (.381). The fifteen (see Table 1) were subjected to factor analysis using varimax rotation. The items yielded three factors with all fifteen items loading significantly on one of each of the factors. The factors were quality, competence and comparability. Composite scores for each of the respondents were computed to obtain their attitude to distance education (ATODL) such that Lower scores reflect less favorable attitudes toward degrees obtained via Distance Learning.

Demographic characteristics. The survey instrument also contained questions to tap demographic information of the respondents such as age, highest educational qualification, gender and job status. Other pertinent background questions related to whether they had ever enrolled in distance education program and if they knew any one on distance learning program including their relationship with such persons.

Procedure

The population involved in this study were the potential human resource personnel and hiring gatekeepers. The sample consisted of 215 postgraduate students undertaking conventional Master's degree program at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The respondents were approached during normal class periods after necessary permission had been obtained from the lecturers. The researcher, assisted by three research assistants explained the purpose of the research to the respondents and requested their assistance in completing the questionnaires. They were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and were not required to indicate their names on the questionnaires. Being graduates students familiar with significance of research, most of the respondents were cooperative and completed the questionnaire by the end of the class sessions. Of the 218 students approached, only one declined while two responses were discarded for errors in completion. The response rate was therefore ninety-nine percent.

Results

Attitudes toward Degrees Obtaining Through Distance Learning Programs

Research question one focused on the general attitudes of prospective human resource personnel towards degrees obtained via distance education. Respondents' attitudes toward distance learning degrees (ATODL) are presented in Table 1. Results showed that majority of the respondents agreed that conventional degree program are more rigorous than distance learning program (73.7%). Also, an overwhelming majority (80.9%) disagreed with the statement that distance learning program are better than conventional degree program. In all, these two attitudes statements were the least favorable with regards to degrees obtained via distance learning as reflected by the respective mean scores. On a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (least favorable) to 5 (most favorable), respondents' mean score on statements regarding rigor of the program was 1.80 (SD 0.829) and quality was 2.07 (SD 1.232).

Table 1: Percentage Distribution, Mean and Standard Deviation of Respondents' Attitudes to Distance Learning (ATODL)

Items	% Response			Mean	SD
	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Undecided	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree		
1 The quality of a bachelor's degree obtained through distance learning is inferior to that obtained through a regular university program	51.0	15.0	34.0	2.79	1.379
2 Conventional university program are more rigorous than distance learning program	73.7	8.9	17.4	2.07	1.232
3 It is easier to obtain a degree by distance learning than by regular university program	52.2	16.2	31.0	2.69	1.365
4* There is no difference in quality between degrees obtained by distance and regular university program	28.3	19.3	52.4	2.62	1.254
5* Distance learning program are better than regular degree program	2.9	16.3	80.9	1.80	0.829
6 Distance learning degrees are for students who cannot gain admission into regular university program	22.7	14.7	62.6	3.59	1.232
7* Students on distance learning program are as intelligent as their counterparts in regular program	60.5	20.0	19.5	3.50	1.125
8* A degree via distance learning is as good as degree obtained via a conventional university degree program	50.0	16.7	33.3	3.18	1.216
9 Very little effort is required to obtain a degree via distance learning	32.8	16.2	51.0	3.30	1.232
10 Graduates who obtained degrees by distance learning are not as competent as graduates of conventional academic program	32.9	14.3	52.9	3.32	1.283
11 Graduates who obtained their degrees via distance learning usually lack adequate skills compared to graduates of regular academic program	40.0	16.5	43.4	3.11	1.312
12 Graduates of regular degree program require less training on the job compared to those from distance learning program	36.8	13.7	49.5	3.22	1.254
13 If I were allowed to select my assistant I would not employ someone with a distance learning degree	25.1	21.3	53.6	3.42	1.218
14 Distance learning degrees are useful for gaining knowledge but not good for preparation for employment	30.3	12.8	56.9	3.37	1.217
15 I will not recommend a distance learning program to anyone who wants a good quality degree					

		38.7	16.0	45.3	3.08	1.385
	Average Total Score	20.7	42.3	30.7	3.01	0.83

Lower scores reflect less favorable attitudes toward degrees obtained via distance Learning (ATODODL) *Scores were reversed .

About half of the respondents agreed that the quality of a bachelor's degree obtained through distance learning is inferior to that obtained through a regular university program (51%) and that it was easier to obtain a degree by distance learning (52.2%). Only one third of the respondents disagreed with the statements. Also, 50% agreed that a distance learning degree is as good as a regular degree.

Three fifths (60.5%) of the respondents agreed that students in the conventional program are as intelligent as those on the distance learning program. Furthermore, 62.6% disagreed that distance learning degrees are for students who cannot gain admission into the regular degree program.

In terms of skill acquisition, comparable proportions of respondents expressed favorable and unfavorable attitudes towards graduates of distance learning program. 40.3% agreed that graduates who obtained their degrees via distance learning usually lack adequate skills compared to graduates of regular academic program, while 43.4% disagreed. 38.7% will not recommend a distance learning program to anyone who wants a good quality degree while 45.3% disagreed with the statement.

Respondents' attitudes regarding employability were slightly favorable. 56.9% disagreed with the statement that distance learning degrees are useful for gaining knowledge but not good for preparation for employment and 53.6% disagreed that they would not employ someone with a distance learning degree if they were to select their assistants. Also, 49.5% disagreed that graduates of regular degree program require less training on the job compared to those from distance learning program. While these may reflect somewhat more favorable responses, it must be noted however, that about half expressed unfavorable attitudes or were undecided regarding employability of graduates of distance learning. In general the majority of the respondents were either undecided or exhibited less favorable attitudes to distance education. Only 30.7% showed favorable attitudes toward distance learning program.

T-test for independent samples was conducted to analyze data for research question two: *Are there gender differences in the attitudes toward distance education?* First, the total scores on the 15 items were computed for each of the respondents and the mean scores were compared. Results revealed no significant differences in the mean scores between males (M=3.03, SD=0.87) and females (M=3.00, SD=0.78) in the total average attitude scores ($t(186) = 0.221, p > 0.05$).

Independent t-test analysis was also conducted to test research question three: *Are there significant differences between respondents who knew students on distance learning program and those who did not?* Results showed that those who knew students on distance education program (M= 3.06, SD=0.86) did not express significantly more favorable attitudes than those who did not know distance education students (M= 3.06, SD=0.75) ($t(174) = 0.459, p > 0.05$). Only about nine percent of the respondents had direct experience with distance education. A comparison of the mean of this group with a majority who had no direct experience with distance education did not yield a significant difference. The result is not surprising given the very small number of those with direct experience.

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations Between Age and Work experience, ATODL and Perceptions of Employability

Measures	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Age	35.4	6.51	+									
Work Experience	8.31	6.67	.636**									
ATODL	3.01	0.83	.042	.119	+							
Perceived employability differential	.49	1.30	.088	.060	-.311**	+						
Perceived competence differential	.39	1.25	.027	.024	-.359**	.636**	+					
Perceived job performance differential	.34	1.32	.046	-.005	-.308**	.532**	.651**	+				
Perceived success differential	.33	1.07	.002	.002	-.376**	.596**	.632**	.482**	+			
Perceived career growth differential	.39	1.07	.055	.088	-.366**	.534**	.533**	.493**	.660**	+		
Perceived long service differential	.24	1.46	.067	.136	-.020	.188*	.030	.234**	.178*	.318**	+	
Perceived overall differential in skills	2.12	5.45	.059	.076	-.375**	.798**	.782	.790**	.783**	.798**	.483**	+

*P<.05 ** P<.01

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine research question four: *Do age and work experience have significant relationship with attitude towards degrees obtained by distance education?* Results in Table 2 showed that the relationship between age and average total attitude score was not significant. Similarly, work experience was not significantly related to the attitude score reflecting that the age was independent of expressed attitudes toward distance learning.

Differences in Perceptions About Utility of Degrees for Graduates of Conventional Higher Education System as Against those of Distance Education

A series of paired t-tests was conducted to analyse data obtained from responses from vignettes which relate to research question five: *Are there significant differences in perceptions of utility of degrees for graduates with comparable academic qualifications from a distance education program and conventional system?* Results in Table 3 shows that on all of the six dimensions (employability, competence, job performance, potential for success, potential for career growth and potential for long service), graduates of conventional higher education were more favorably perceived and significantly rated higher despite the fact that both graduates had similar academic standing.

Table 3: T-Test For Paired Samples Showing The Differences In Perceptions About Employability For Graduates Of Conventional (CP) And Distance Learning programs (DLP)

S.No	Receptions Perceptions on	Mean	N	SD	t	p
1	Employability score (DLP)	3.64	213	1.031	-5.56	.000
	Employability score (CP)	4.13	213	.952		
2	Competence score (DLP)	3.49	211	1.007	-4.50	.000
	Competence score (CP)	3.88	211	.931		
3	Job Performance (DLP)	3.55	212	.984	-3.80	.000
	Job Performance (CP)	3.90	212	.938		
4	Potential for success (DLP)	3.79	210	.955	-4.46	.000
	Potential for success (CP)	4.12	210	.864		
5	Potential for Career growth (DLP)	3.81	212	.994	-5.34	.000
	Potential for Career growth (CP)	4.20	212	.804		
6	Potential for Long service (DLP)	3.78	211	1.101	-4.46	.000
	Potential for Long Service (CP)	4.01	211	1.021		

Table 4: Independent T-Test Showing Mean Score Differences for Males and Females In Their Ratings Of Graduates Of Distance Education And Conventional System

Differentials	Gender of respondent	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Employability	Female	90	.5222	1.30020	.351	.726
	Male	122	.4590	1.29300		
Competence	Female	90	.4444	1.36663	.636	.526
	Male	122	.4590	1.29300		

	Male	120	.3333	1.16196		
Job Performance	Female	90	.4556	1.35050	1.132	.259
	Male	121	.2479	1.29281		
Success	Female	87	.2989	1.02430	.249	.804
	Male	122	.3361	1.44494		
Career	Female	90	.3778	1.09553	-.072	.943
	Male	121	.3884	1.05965		
Service	Female	89	.0449	1.43741	1.540	.125
	Male	121	.3554	1.44833		
Total	Female	85	.8824	.67948	.200	.841
	Male	117	.9023	.71297		

Further analysis using independent t-test was conducted to find out if males and females differently rated graduates from distance education and those on conventional program. Results in Table 4 showed that there were no gender differences in the preferential ratings for graduates from conventional program on each of the six dimensions.

Do respondents with technical education or higher national diploma differ from those who obtained university or Bachelor's degrees? Table 5 shows that respondents who had higher national diploma tended to differ from those with Bachelor's degrees in their ratings on three of the six dimensions; employability ($t(175)=-3.111, p=0.002$), job performance ($t(174)=-2.284, p=0.024$) and potential for career growth ($t(174)=2.65, p=0.19$). For all these dimensions, it was observed that for polytechnic graduates with Higher National Diploma the mean differences were lower than those for university graduates. This means that those with Higher National Diploma perceived little difference between graduates from distance learning program and those from regular academic program.

However, while this pattern of results was observed for the other three dimensions (competence, potential for long service and success) the differences observed were not significant.

Table 5: T-Test For Paired Samples Showing Perceived Differences in Employability Among HND and B.Sc Degree Holders

Differentials	Education of respondent*	N	Mean	SD	t	p
Employability	HND	83	.0723	1.41234	-3.11	.002
	B.Sc	94	.6915	1.23590		
Competence	HND	82	.1220	1.43493	-1.76	
	B.Sc	94	.4681	1.17044		
Job Performance	HND	83	.0241	1.43965	-2.28	.002
	B.Sc	93	.4839	1.23017		
Potential Success	HND	83	-8.0120	1.57336	.298	ns
	B.Sc	91	-7.9451	1.39334		
Career Growth	HND	83	.1446	1.13838	-2.37	.02
	B.Sc	93	.5269	1.00641		
Long Service	HND	82	.2439	1.52802	-2.98	ns
	B.Sc	94	.3404	1.31618		
Total	HND	71	3.2169	.85358	2.49	.01
	B.Sc	84	2.8802	.82457		

*Highest Educational Level before Current M.Sc program

Relationship between Attitudes Toward Distance Learning Degrees And Perceptions About Employability Of Graduates

Question 6, which aimed to examine if there are significant relationships between attitudes toward distance learning degrees and respondents' perception of differential in skills of a distance learning graduate and a graduate from a conventional program was tested using bivariate correlations between ATODL and each of the six dimensions on perceptions of employability. Results in Table 2 showed significant relationship between ATODL and perceived differential in employability skills (.311, $p<.01$), competence (.359, $p<.01$), job performance (.308, $p<.01$), career success (.376, $p<.01$) and career growth (.366, $p<.01$). The relationship between ATODL and perceived differentials in potential for long service was not significant (.020, p.n.s). The overall differential in job readiness skills was significantly associated with ATODL. Thus, unfavorable attitudes to distance learning education were associated with perceptions of higher levels of skills differentials between graduates from regular program and distance education.

Discussion and Implications

Previous research on distance education has focused more on learning outcomes and achievement of students with little attention paid to the utility or value of the credentials obtained through distance learning. This study therefore sought to examine the perceptions of potential human resource personnel or hiring gatekeepers about the utility of distance education degrees in terms of obtaining employment and performing successfully on the job. An understanding of future employers' perceptions of the utility or acceptability of credentials obtained via distance learning has implications for attractiveness and effectiveness of such program. The less favorable the perceptions of the utility of credentials, the higher the discrimination against graduates of distance education and the more limited their employment opportunities.

The findings of this research show that attitudes toward distance education were not sufficiently favorable. In general, only about a third of potential employers exhibited favorable attitude towards distance education. As observed from literature, although graduates may be satisfied with distance education, employers and academy exhibit more favorable attitudes toward traditional degrees (e.g., Puffer, 2005). In addition, consistent with previous findings, there were concerns about distance education as against traditional program in that conventional or traditional program were considered better, more rigorous and the credentials are believed to be more difficult to obtain (e.g., Adams & DeFleur, 2006). In this study, students undertaking traditional program were considered more intelligent and those in distance learning program were seen as those who could not gain admission into regular program. The demographic characteristics such as age, gender and work experience did not significantly influence these perceptions.

Students invest huge financial resources obtaining higher education with the expectation that there would be good return on their investment. In an economic climate characterized by high levels of unemployment and underemployment, assurances that their degrees will translate to jobs or careers or acceptance into continuing higher degree program is important for students in traditional and nontraditional program. Our findings however reflect that the potential employers discriminate against graduates of distance education in terms of perceived utility of their credentials for obtaining entry-level jobs. Graduates of rational or conventional degree program were rated higher on employability, competence, potentials for high job performance, career success, career growth and long service. This finding is consistent with those of previous studies which found that in most hiring decisions, respondents would choose candidates with traditional degrees (e.g., Adams & DeFleur, 2006; Adams, DeFleur & Heald, 2007). As the findings reflect, the translation of distance education into jobs is greatly hampered by the less favorable perceptions of distance education by the hiring gatekeepers or potential employers in this study.

When hiring personnel perceive credentials from distance education as less favorable, there is an increased tendency to discriminate against their graduates in hiring process. This study revealed a significant correlation between attitudes toward distance education and perceived differentials in utility of distance education credentials as against those from traditional programs.

As students continue to enroll in this growing alternative mode of education, this research has implications for institutions offering distance education in that concerns of stakeholders must be taken into consideration in order to enhance the academic and practical utility of distance education. Significant improvement is needed in terms of rigor, quality, delivery modes and instructional materials. The proliferation of distance education programs in order to increase access to higher education among the teeming Nigerian youth has raised issues of quality of academic credentials. Distance education should therefore not be primarily taken as an income generating enterprise for institutions but as an avenue to offer quality education that has the potential to effectively enhance the graduates' personal achievement and access to meaningful employment and higher education. It is also important to engage potential employers in course development and encourage students' interaction with industry through internships, projects and other innovative activities. In general, it is necessary to change perceptions especially among human resource personnel, about concerns relating to quality and job preparedness of distance education. It is expected that with more exposure to competent graduates of distance education as interns and employees, attitudes of employers will improve over time.

In order to enhance the negotiation skills or acceptability of credentials obtained via distance education; students require appropriate skills to prepare them for the job market. Consequently, institutions need to invest in enhancing the value of the credentials through appropriate counseling and skills training for gaining employment. Furthermore, the

leadership of the institutions needs to work with industry to constantly monitor and evaluate the performance of their graduates as well as provide a feedback for program improvement.

The findings showed that participants who had higher national diplomas as their first level degrees were perceived distance education graduates more favorably than those who had bachelor's degree. This 'similar-to-me effect' in hiring preferences has implications for training of recruiters and the composition of the selection panel in the hiring process. The more heterogeneous the educational experiences of the team, the less the bias in hiring.

These research findings have implications for future studies, especially in the Nigerian setting. First, a more detailed comparison of the different types of delivery methods should be undertaken to examine if there are significant differences in perception of distance education based on the delivery mode. Institutions offering distance education differ in their level of sophistication in the use of web-based instruction and IT. Will knowledge of the rigor of the program enhance the perceived value of the degree? Another limitation of this study is that the participants for this study were graduate students of programs offering courses related to human resource management at the University of Ibadan. Further research should be done with larger and varied groups with wider geographical coverage. As reflected in previous studies, recruiters or gatekeepers tend to question whether scientific content and laboratory practical experience can effectively be taught outside the traditional mode (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009), thus implying that perceptions of quality of distance education is to some extent contextual. Therefore, additional research is required to determine the influence of the type of the field of study and type of industry on perceptions about distance education.

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