ONLINE GRADUATE DEGREES: PERCEPTIONS OF MOROCCAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Online education is one of the new approaches emerging around the world, and particularly this adopted approach targets to build students' future career. This study aims at identifying the university students' perceptions of online education and the extent to which online degrees are credible for their academic and professional life. Online degrees are now implemented in higher education worldwide; however, this type of education is new and rarely operational in Moroccan universities. Qualitative data were collected and analyzed through a semi-structured interview in which 53 university students participated, from 9 Moroccan higher education institutions. This exploratory study seeks to examine the students' perceptions about these and enrollment in online programs specifically those offered by their institutions and that yield to e-degrees. The results of this current study indicate that most students use only free online programs for their personal development as complementary to their studies. Interviewees expressed their worry towards the acceptability and credibility that the holders of online degrees may encounter in the Moroccan job market. They also revealed that the Moroccan higher education still lacks solid, developed and useful online platforms, such as MOOCs, to use beyond the educational environment entities. Thus, the present research urges further studies with Moroccan employers to probe their perceptions towards hiring students with online degrees.

KEYWORDS

Online Education, Online Degrees, Personal Development, University Students, Academic and Professional Life, Future Career

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the way of doing studies, getting knowledge and learning is under a constant change. New technology is now allowing everyone to learn in a flexible way in terms of money, time and place. Many studies in the field of education confirmed that the emergence of internet technology is being very helpful to access online higher education degrees for university students around the world (Fan-Wei Kung, 2017, p. 42). Most students around the world want to enroll in online graduate programs, as they offer a flexible knowledge. Kaupins, Wanek, and Coco (2014) affirmed that "online degrees have increasingly gained employer acceptance" (p.222). Besides, in colleges and universities nation-wide more students are enrolling in online classes in order to successfully manage the demands of their daily lives while still achieving their academic and career goals (Simlicio, 2019).

E-learning, distance learning, online learning and a myriad of other labels are now used to sell and promote alternatives to face-to-face classrooms as systems and changing social and communication norms (Ragusa, & Crampton, 2017, p.1210). Multiple indicators suggest that we are in the "golden age" of e-learning (Isaac, & Bernstein, 2018, p.1617) to be promoted in universities. However, still e-learning approach is struggling to take its right value within higher education and the job market in Morocco.

The present study is conducted to explore the presence of online education and the Moroccan university students' perceptions of online degrees. The students' viewpoints are very significant because they are the future employees. This research raises two main questions to be answered in the part of results:

- 1- How far university students are dealing with online education in their studies?
- 2- To what extent are online degrees present in the Moroccan higher education?

2. METHODS

This exploratory study uses a qualitative approach to investigate the students' perceptions about online degrees. Out of 65 students who were approached, 53 students expressed their will to participate. They were briefed via email about the purpose of the study. The research instrument was a semi-structured interview in which questions were about what students know in relation to online education, its usage and its benefit in their lives and what they think about enrolling in Moroccan or international online programs that offer degrees or certificates. The pattern of the study (n=53) was representative since all of the students are Moroccans, enrolled in different (9) Moroccan universities and in different academic levels (1st, 2nd & 3rd year, Masters). The representation was important also because the interviewees belong to different disciplines and departments including humanities, engineering, computer science, economics, in addition to, Arabic, French and English studies...etc

3. RESULTS

All the interviews results were satisfactory, since they gave a valuable addition and more insights to the subject. The interviews were interpreted and analyzed in two emerging themes, which are related to the research questions.

3.1 Theme 1: Positive Attitude towards Online Education

The majority of the interviewees reported, that online education is of a great benefit to them, it enhances their level in the field of their study or other subjects of their interest. For them, this type of learning is more appealing and motivating than the face to face one. Another participant declared that the major advantage of using technology is the numerous interactive activities, which allow more sharing of knowledge and more understanding of the courses. Most of the interviewees stated that the Moroccan universities have MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) platforms but are not up dated; most of them are still under try and only few courses are free of access, open and available. Some MOOCs need invitations and others need personal accounts with passwords.

Moreover, all participants declared that they face difficulties when using the universities' online learning platforms since they are just in a trial phase. They affirmed that their professors advise them to use any available external MOOCs and electronic information for more knowledge enrichment. Furthermore, students reported that collaborations between universities had been settled to improve online platforms; however, most of such projects still need promotion and more enhancements at different levels. Some interviewees confirmed that few universities are developing MOOCs for some foundation courses and credit bearing courses to help students enlarge their academic background.

Interviewees agreed that the adoption of online education will foster, in addition to their academic knowledge, other skills related to students' personalities; such as being responsible, independent and creative. Students expressed that they appreciate the increase use of blended learning classrooms, as a balance and complementary style. Besides, an interviewee affirmed that e-learning now is occupying a great part in students' life as they benefit from online lectures, courses, conferences...In addition to that, building connections with learning communities and responsive instructors.

3.2 Theme 2: Absence of Online Degrees and the Worry about their Credibility

One of the interviewees declared: "we are in a globalized world... e-degrees should have its place within our educational system". Besides, participants expressed their vital need for more ICT courses to excel in online learning. Some of the interviewees pointed that the "mobile learning", has facilitated their learning process, and that of their professors, as it is accessible at any time and place. Most interviewees agreed on the fact that the presence of online degrees in Morocco is nearly absent, which makes them worry about their integration in the job market, and that might elevate the percentage of unemployment within this category. They also highlighted that Moroccan employers give more chance to applicants with classical degrees.

An interviewee stated that employers should ensure competent e-degree holders a job, and encourage this new method of online learning; which is suitable for some students' life constraints. One added "a student may have a dangerous health problem that urges him/her to take a distance course". Another participant stressed that distance learning is a precious chance for working students. Most interviewees insisted on the need of having well-structured online learning programs that fit their levels and life situations.

More than 50% of the interviewees agreed that the absence of online degrees is unacceptable, since this digital generation impose the use of technology and favours the e-learning process. Participants affirmed that the Moroccan higher education ought to cope with this digitalized world and adapt, simultaneously, the traditional education with the challenges of the online one. Finally, an interviewee added that with the support and help of the decision makers it would be easy to form an e- learning environment because students are usually using e-devices and are already familiar with them.

4. DISCUSSION

Online education is fastly becoming the most popular alternative to traditional face-to-face education (Bejerano, 2008, p. 408). Students expressed their willingness and interest in using online education as a part or whole of their study program. The most important is that the program, be it online or face to face, should bring real and relevant knowledge. For example, students gain knowledge from blended learning environments (Bojoviæ, M. D. 2017). interviewees revealed that the ultimate thing for them is the easy access to education, and distance learning/education is the easiest. It should only be well implemented.

Interviews show the urgent need to adopt and adapt online programs within the Moroccan higher institutions, as it is a requirement for this digital generation. As "twenty-first century learners find themselves involved in online learning" (Lumbreras & Rupley, 2017, p. 381). Online education is present in the Moroccan universities, in a way that students are using online courses independently for their personal benefit, without the intention of earning any e-degree. Interviews showed that professors advise students for online autonomous work, as to use the existing MOOCs even if they are in their premature functional stages.

Students are ready to be engaged in the online education experience if they get any reassuring viewpoints from employers about online degrees credibility. Vukelic, and Pogarcic (2011) agreed that "numerous employers refuse to employ a person with an online degree because they cannot estimate their level of knowledge and skills based on this degree" (p.1471). Employers will have to build their refusal or acceptance (Kaupins, Wanek, & Coco, 2014) of online degrees on tangible evidence and reasons because online education is highly increasing. The results of this research are not conclusive; however, a concern about online degrees for Moroccan students, like elsewhere, in terms of credibility and career is raised.

5. CONCLUSION

This exploratory study has shown a clear viewpoint of university students about online education as a positive approach for their learning process. However, online degrees are far away to be implemented in the Moroccan higher education, due to the lack of its credibility in the Moroccan job market. That is why students expressed their big worry about their future if they choose to sign up to complete their studies through this option of getting e-degrees. The research participants insisted on the need of an effective online education at different levels to be promoted among the students' community. The present study contributes to the field of higher education's development in a way of implementing developed online education for university graduate students.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that university management explore more online education for university students to get the needed awareness of the field and be able to implement credible online programs. Moroccan universities should go forward on a daily basis in the use of technology; they should also ensure that their students can successfully

navigate the online platforms. The best way for universities to improve online education could be working on internal and external partnerships, i.e. public/private, Moroccan/international and offering online degrees for the students' benefits. It is also recommended to work within conventions or consortiums for more credibility in terms of knowledge, expertise and certification. Thus, the present paper may open the door for other studies to promote and value online degrees for university students and also to rethink the human resources' processes in hiring newly graduate students with online degrees from different disciplines.

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