

Preference of Conventional Degrees by Educational Institutions: Two Cases from Pakistan and India

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ABSTRACT

Although the number of programmes offered by distance education has increased significantly and gained global importance, research shows that there is a resistance towards distance degree holders and many employers are sceptical at the time of appointing such employees as the quality of outcome is questioned. This cold war has gone to the extent that especially the teachers earning degrees through distance are sometimes considered as second class in merit at the time of their appointment in public and private educational institutions. This paper reports on the findings of a qualitative case study research that investigated and explored the support given by employers to teachers during their study period through distance education and the perceptions of the employers towards the worth of distance education degrees. Two universities offering distance education in Pakistan and India were taken as units for investigation. Two semi-structured interview protocols were developed to collect data through three focus group interviews and five individual interviews of teachers and employers, respectively. Stufflebeam's (1983) CIPP evaluation model was adapted to analyse the data and important findings showed that the perceptions of the participants from both countries regarding the support and worth of distance degrees varied from employer to employer tilting more towards conventional degrees.

Keywords: Conventional degrees, distance degrees, employer perceptions, teacher perceptions, value of distance degrees

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INTRODUCTION

For years, distance education has had a bad reputation in terms of educational quality and research suggests that literature review spanning over many years indicates that a resistance is sensed for distance

degrees during the hiring process. It is believed that such mode of education is bureaucratic and hierarchical in nature and has a weaker academic culture than conventional universities. Todd and Wong (2000) stated that early 70s and 80s marked distance degrees with a stigma, as few dubious higher education institutions were involved in offering shortcut degrees to the students. A careful reading of institutional history suggests the existence of such institutes at the margins of many poorly conceived and poorly resourced schemes of correspondence education, which justify the label poor substitute (Evans & Nations, 1993). Since conventional instruction is still perceived by many to be better organised than distance education, this system has been subjected to criticism in the field of education, which at times gives a timely opportunity to the employers to consider employees with distance education degrees as second class citizens.

With the passage of time, it seems that distance education trend is rising within a highly competitive educational market (Seibold, 2007; Thirunarayaan, 2010) and the enrolments have increased significantly. Shortage of funds has forced many countries to consider distance education as one of the best alternatives to control the predicament as it requires less space and resources and is more modern. Distance education is at a turning point and more teachers and students are being attracted towards the new dimension of teaching (Daniel, 2001), especially those who want to retain their jobs and family obligations (Thompson,

2009), considering the limited flexible time they have at their disposal (Johnson, 2003) while studying for additional degrees. Bernado *et al.* (2004), Campbell and Swift (2006), and Chaney (2002) propound that advancement in technology has opened vistas for educational institutions to offer online courses and advertisements for such programmes are on the rise. Wright (2014) terms this as a pop-culture phenomenon. Keeping the high demand in mind, such institutions have an opportunity to revisit their distance programmes and develop them into a world class form of educational delivery; therefore, it is imperative for the institutions to be aware of the perceptions and needs of the market at the time of developing and offering programmes, as the graduated students will have to eventually offer their services at their institutions (Chaney, 2002; Russell, 2004; Adams & DeFleur, 2006). For quite many people, distance may not be ideal, but it may be all that is available. Rao (2002) believes that immediate social problems would be created if people see that advantaged groups are given access to conventional and relatively expensive education, whereas the disadvantaged get a second rate distance education.

The scenario in quite many developing countries is different as the society judges the importance of vocational work negatively for ideological reasons. Government support is doubtful and research shows that employers are biased at the time of appointing candidates with distance degrees (Adams *et al.*, 2007; Carnevale,

2007; Flowers, 2007; Linardopoulos, 2012) and the support given by the recruiters is minimal. Hence, to overcome the perception that distance education programmes are inferior than more traditional face-to-face courses, the programmes need to be credible and respected, while appropriate support, incentives and rewards should be introduced by the governments and employers for the enrolled and prospective students. On the other hand, in developed countries, many students from distance institutions are more likely to be respected than scorned as it is generally believed that distance education is much more difficult and compels the students to the subject matter longer and more intensely (Singh & Sudarshan, 1996). Moreover, the students have an obligation towards the society and are expected to live up to it by their government. At the same time, they enjoy moderate financial support from their government and employers, and therefore, enjoy a much more positive image in the society. In spite of this optimistic picture, Bates (1990) and Keegan (1996) opine that although the outlook of employers towards distance degrees has improved, many are still sceptical of its usefulness in the workplace.

This study supports the research within higher education and aims to explore and investigate the backing given by the employers to their teachers during their study period through distance education and their perceptions towards the integrity of such degrees. To seek answers to this problem, a qualitative case study was conducted at two well-known distance institutions in

Pakistan and India that offer post-graduate and research degrees in Teaching English as a Foreign/Second Language (TEFL/TESL) through correspondence and online. The study raises the following questions:

1. How do educational institution employers perceive the worth of distance education degrees in comparison to conventional degrees?
2. What support is provided to the teachers by such employers when studying through a distance mode?

STUDY CONTEXT

This study was carried out in two countries of Asia, which is home to the world's largest number of learners studying at a distance (Jung, 2012). The research participants were English language teachers who were in the process of upgrading their professional degree through distance education. Two English departments at distance universities in Pakistan and India offering postgraduate and research degrees were selected for this study. The participants in Pakistan were in their dissertation writing stage and the Indian students had completed their correspondence course work and were attending a 15-day workshop/contact programme at the campus. The teachers in Pakistan were enrolled in a master's in TEFL programme, whereas the teachers in India were enrolled in MPhil in TESL programme. The entry requirement for the master's degree is BA or master's in English Literature and for MPhil degree is a master's in English Literature. Both

are one year programmes offering eight and 11 courses, respectively, followed by research dissertation. All courses are offered through correspondence including study guides and specially prepared readers containing updated and relevant theoretical and research articles. In addition, assignments for each course offered, visits to study centres for tutor support, a 15-day workshop/contact programme and final examination are essential. It should be noted that the distance university in India does not offer a master's programme. Neither of the universities is accredited with any national or international accreditation agency and the courses, systems, and processes are developed, whetted out and implemented by departmental committees. In spite of minor structural differences in the programme, the objective of the study was to find out the worth of distance education by employers and the support extended to the teachers enrolled in such programmes during the study period.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Distance education or distance learning is a process where the students' learning takes place in which they are separated by time and space from their teachers. It is an excellent mode of learning for those who cannot attend face-to-face classes and at the same time would like to earn an additional degree regardless of class, creed, gender or distance (Kanwar & Taplin, 2001). This mode of study has the requirements and ability to reach anyone anywhere and has been acknowledged as a form of delivery

system for improving the current status of teacher education and training globally (Vaskovics, 2015). If the degree plays a pivotal role to ascertain the financial standing and status in the employment market (Lenski, 1966), both employers and employees should accept the fact that some degrees have a better stand in today's work market simply because of the way in which they are presented and taught. Many gatekeepers who review resumes for various kinds of openings are doubtful at the time of short listing and appointing those who have qualified through distance (Mustafa, 2013) as the mode of training, examination and quality of outcome are questioned. This cold war has gone to the extent that the learners qualified through distance are sometimes considered as second class in merit at the time of appointment (Iqbal, 2002).

Value of Degrees

There is a body of research conducted in various types of industries including educational institutions to find out how distance degrees are viewed at the time of employment. A study carried out by Open University of Hong Kong in 1999 on 488 employers and 2558 students investigated the value they gave to open degrees. A majority of employers agreed that distance learning degrees were credible, while 90% of them said that such degrees enabled students to work as well as grow professionally, and that they could see a vast improvement in their problem solving skills. Findings also indicated that if given an opportunity, they would

recommend their employees to upgrade their educational qualifications through distance programmes.

Moore and Kearsley (1996) reported a research conducted by the Distance Education and Training Council in 1994 in ten member institutions to determine how 674 graduates felt about their distance learning experience. A follow-up survey was also sent to the employers of these participants. The majority of employers (94%) responded that they thought the graduates compared favourably in knowledge, skills and attitude, and 81% said that the graduates performed better on the job.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, Government University Quality Assurance Council, UK measured academic excellence in more than a hundred universities in the UK including Open University, UK and to everyone's surprise, the Open University was positioned in the first ten British Universities in terms of academic excellence (Keegan, 2002). This brought about a visible change in the attitude of the learners, academicians, as well as the employers. *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation* and Commonwealth of Learning has formulated policy statements in favour of distance education and the World Bank has provided monetary support for such programmes. Abundant budget is allocated for distance learning, support given by the government, volume of research done on this mode of learning, even the fact that distance education students today read their Open University books openly as they commute,

which they used to hide in brown paper wrappers in the past are marks of a new legitimacy (Perraton, 1999).

Research study findings of Adams and DeFleur (2006), Zain-ul-Abadin and Adam (2010) and Adams, Lee, and Cortese (2012) coincide with each other. The first study found that only 7% of higher academic management of public sector universities was keen to give admission to graduates with online degrees, and only 11% management of private sector universities were prepared to admit students with online degrees. The second study results were based on a countywide survey to assess job qualifications of applicants who had degrees from conservative and distance education universities. The result yielded that those with a degree from traditional universities were preferred. The third study included 713 high school principals in the US to find out the degree preference that they give when hiring teachers. Two hiring situations were created: the first was prospective employees with traditional versus partial distance education and the second those with traditional versus wholly distance. In both scenarios, applicants with conventional degrees were found to be a favourable choice.

A study conducted by Columbaro and Monaghan (2009) based on literature spanning over seven years was studied within four databases: Academic Source Complete, Education Source Complete, Business Source Complete, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Abstracts. The result culled from this study specified that

employers or gatekeepers may still have a soft corner for those with traditional degrees at the time of hiring process. However, further research was required.

Puffer (2005) investigated the available online dissertation abstracts and articles published in professional journals from 1979 to 2003 on distance education. 312 studies and articles were reviewed to find out the worth of distance degrees by employers and graduates. The results from various online publications indicated that the perceptions of employers and graduates regarding the value of such degrees have hardly changed over the past 25 years. In spite of this, graduates still continue to enrol in distance courses and employers continue to give more preference to those who apply for jobs with conventional degrees.

Research studies by Adams and DeFleur (2006), Chaney (2002), and Russel (2004) indicated a mixed perception pertaining to the worth of distance degrees. The study also indicated that distance learning provided a convenient option for multi-tasking adults to enhance their education and the opportunity for universities to admit a large number of students without expanding the campus vertically or horizontally.

Employer support. Supporting employees who are enrolled in distance programmes is beneficial to the organisations as the skills learnt would be directly applied in the workplace; therefore, employer support during the study period is highly recommended. On the other hand, it is entirely at the discretion of the employers to define the degree of support extended

to its workers, which may include a full or partial fee, financial loan, time release, offering flexible working hours, support to look for donors, offering a repayment guarantee to the educational institutions and many more depending on the availability of funding. Many employers would like to send their teachers for further education through distance mode, but doubt the quality of course information and the assessment guidelines and periodic student evaluation for positive learning outcomes (Parscal & Riemer, 2010). On the practical side and based on the researcher's experience, many teachers refuse to grow professionally as they have to tend to multiple responsibilities at home with no support. Meanwhile, employers in educational institutions are sceptical regarding the worth of distance degrees when short listing the candidates for appointment or considering financial support or time release for additional education (Eaton, 2001). Literature review findings give an indication of mixed perceptions of the importance and value of distance learning globally, more tilted towards the traditional face-to-face option, though distance learning preference will gain a firm ground in years to come. Employer support may vary from institute to institute, but on the face of it, this support will take time to establish itself.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative case study research was preferred for the project to study contemporary phenomena by exploring individuals and organisations within a given context.

Creswell (2013) explains that a case study approach explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time “through detailed and in-depth data collection” (p. 97). The objective was to explore and compare the units based on the research questions. Two distance universities in Pakistan and India served as units for the study, where female and male students were studying for their master’s and MPhil degrees in Teaching English as a Foreign/Second Language (TEFL/TESL). The researchers aimed to explore the perceptions of the teachers and administrators who were working in different educational institutions through interviews that are particularly useful for exploratory research, where the goal is to generate ideas and to validate them against everyday experiences of the participants. The master’s programme is not offered by the distance university in India; however, the course structure as explained earlier is almost the same in which the students have to study through correspondence materials. In order to enable the researchers to achieve the objectives of the study, one researcher visited the distance institutions in both countries at a preset time keeping in mind the availability of maximum students. The participants in Pakistan were in their dissertation writing stage and were invited to gather at a common meeting point for interviews, whereas the Indian students had completed their correspondence course work and were attending a 15-day workshop / contact programme at the campus.

Tools and Data collection

The researchers used individual and focus group interviews for the study and prepared two semi-structured interview protocols for teachers and employers based on an adapted version of Stufflebeam’s (1983) evaluation model. The four categories (Context, Input, Process and Product) were reduced to three by eliminating Context as the researchers knew where the interviewees were working and had retrieved their workplace details through the internet. The interview protocol for the teachers had three questions under Input; two under Process, and four under Product. Individual interview guide prepared for the employers had two questions under each category and a couple of general questions to find out the qualifications of their teachers and the upgraded degrees they were interested in. The focus group interviews took about 60 to 75 minutes each, whereas the individual interviews took about 30 minutes each. The interviews were conducted by only one researcher due to distance and paucity of funds. All the steps recommended by the researchers to interview the participants were considered and it was made sure to establish an appropriate atmosphere by addressing the cognitive, interpersonal, interactional, communicative, emotional and dynamic aspects of the interviews so that the participants would feel secure and talk freely. At the same time, ethical dimensions were also taken into consideration. All the participants were asked to fill in the informed consent form that included among other details confidentiality, choice to drop

out at any point of the study, human safety and permission to record the interviews. The aim of the interviews was to yield in depth data and provide a true picture of opinions, experiences, expectations, attitudes and feelings of the interviewees. The researchers were thus able to analyse the data individually and then as a team to validate the findings by extracting perception patterns, themes and categories to give a holistic picture.

Study Participants

The study participants were selected by convenience from both countries who were either in their dissertation writing stage or were attending workshop/ contact programme to finish their master's or MPhil programmes. The researchers through personal contacts were able to get appointments with the employers for individual interviews. For the purpose of this research, employers included the head, principal, dean, and two HR administrators who were directly or indirectly involved in developing recruitment policies, job descriptions, and were also part of the hiring team.

The researcher conducted eight interviews in all: two group interviews (8 participants each) comprising three female and five male teachers in Pakistan studying for master's degree and one in India (12 participants) comprising eight female and four male teachers, who were studying for MPhil degree; three individual interviews with principals of a school and college, and the dean of a university in

Pakistan and two individual interviews with college administrators from HR departments in India. Evaluation framework based on an adapted version of Stufflebeam's CIPP (1983) model, with three categories including Input, Process and Product, was used to synthesise and analyse the interview data. The themes that emerged from the detailed interviews were categorised for analysis.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Three categories that emerged very strongly from the interviews were: (a) institutional support during the study period-student point of view (Input); (b) institutional support during the study period-employer point of view (Process); and (c) value of distance degree in the market (Product).

Institutional support during study period-student point of view (Input)

Most participants from Pakistan and India stated that they did not receive enough support from their workplace in terms of time release or sponsorship to earn their degrees through distance programmes. This is understandable as teachers in public and private educational institutions are sparse and long period of study leave usually creates teaching problems. Moreover, funding allocation is limited and support from the government is hardly visible. The participants from both countries were quite disappointed and had various stories to tell; most of them related to support in release time to attend workshop/contact programmes that were part of the study. Of

all the group interviews conducted, only two participants who worked for a private school in Pakistan said that they were supported by the employers in terms of time release for the study.

One reported:

“Since the principal of this school had done his masters from the same Open University, he realizes the problems of distance learners and he spent hours sitting with me and my colleague explaining the concepts. If it had not been for his support, my colleague and I would have had to spend double the time understanding the concepts. We were allowed leave to attend the workshop and visit the library housed at the main campus. Of course we’ve signed a bond.” He added, *“I would consider the master’s programme that I am doing currently far superior than I did through f2f mode. I am more aware of the latest research in teaching English language, have developed confidence, and my colleagues were real professionals.”*

Another teacher said:

“We have been given 15 days off to attend the workshop with the understanding that we will offer training programmes once both of us qualify. This would be a great experience for both of us and I

am looking forward to be called a ‘trainer’. This is my first master’s and I have no words to express how elevated I am in terms of my professional development.”

This indicates that probably those employers who go through the process of distance education perceive the degree positively and realise the worth of such programmes. This particular principal encouraged and supported his teachers as he wanted to develop them professionally to bring about a change in the school system as he found programme superior and robust.

A disappointed teacher from a public college explained:

“The bottom line is that nobody cares about our professional growth. My principal said second master’s wasn’t required, so I didn’t get leave during my study period. It’s good that the workshop session was in summer...Once we join the institution, we stay where we are till we retire. I have learnt a lot from this course and will recommend it to my friends.”

A student in India had to make excuses to attend the 15-day workshop at the distance university and shared:

“I knew from the experiences of my colleagues that my principal would never release me to attend the workshop, so I had to make an excuse to take two weeks off.”

Another teacher complained:

“My pay will be deducted, but I don’t mind. The workshop is very important for me. University Grants Commission (UGC) should intervene to make the leave process manageable because the benefits of the postgraduate programme would naturally go to the students. We have to earn professional development points for promotion, so having an additional degree is very important for us.”

Three participants from the same college stated that the employers were quite supportive and they had benefitted from whatever the distance course had to offer them. It was quite evident from the data that the participants from both countries were not encouraged, especially by public sector institutions to join the distance programmes; therefore, they were not obliged to support the teachers. All the participants were of the consensus that leave should be given to attend the contact programme.

Institutional support during study period-employer point of view (Process)

One school in Pakistan offered in-house teacher training workshops and ongoing participation in such events was encouraged. The principal stated that the school supported teachers who went on short courses offered by different organisations in terms of time release and explained:

“PD is essential to cater to the needs of the masses, and to provide service to the community. We encourage teachers to implement new methodologies and if the training courses are relevant to the needs of our institution, we definitely support our staff. Young female teachers are more motivated, but not male teachers... they have evening jobs. We also prefer to support female teachers as the retention rate is high, but distance degrees do not enjoy a good reputation in the market. I have heard about fake degrees, non-recognized institutions, and other such things.”

The principal of a public sector college presumably did not believe in the professional growth of teachers and stated:

“Developing teachers is not required as almost all have done master’s or MEd and know to teach They don’t have time to implement modern methodologies as they have to finish the courses. Moreover, it is not good for female teachers to stay after school to attend programmes. Government pay is not competitive, so why would my teachers put in extra effort.”

The dean of a department at a university said that the faculty was encouraged to grow professionally, but they had to carve out time from other commitments as public institutions usually have limited staff and releasing them was not convenient.

“The government recommends that every teacher should be released once every five years to upgrade their professional degree, but this is only on paper. It’s sad, but that’s the way it is! The distance programmes are relevant at times and it would be possible to give them a few days off, but we don’t force our teachers.”

Two HR administrators from colleges in India explained that in this increasingly complex global world, the professionals needed to have an edge over the others and the only way to update themselves was to enrol in courses offered by distance institutions. This way the teachers could work as well as study. One administrator responded as follows:

“My institution is committed to provide equal opportunities in higher education to the teachers and in preparing them to make a meaningful contribution to the society. All teachers have master’s or PhD degrees in their specialized field and if they want to update themselves, it’s their individual responsibility. Mark my words, very soon almost all teachers would have

done at least one course through distance.”

The second HR administrator shared:

“My institution does not offer scholarships to the teachers as we already have a cohort of well qualified and trained teachers; however, specialization is preferred and we support short time release. An additional degree paves way for promotion, which is important in this competitive world.”

Distance degree value in the market (Product)

A principal of a school in Pakistan was quite supportive of the distance degrees, but preferred such degrees from abroad and stated:

“Many employers have little information about distance education and they view face-to-face teaching more valuable yielding positive outcomes. They think distance learning takes away the charm of interactive discussion, cooperative learning, immediate feedback, public speaking, and the ability to learn from each other. This is because distance education degrees have been declared fake at times and such institutions don’t even have a proper office, thus the credibility of distance programmes is at stake. For a few more years, I would opt for teachers with a

traditional degree and would request the government to recognize distance degrees in TEFL.”

A principal of a public sector college in Pakistan stated that he had heard a lot about the distance programmes, but it was not required by his teachers. As far as hiring teachers for his institution was concerned, conventional degrees were acceptable. He further added:

“The distance university in Pakistan is no doubt one of the oldest universities in Asia, but I would doubt the quality of courses. The graduated students from such universities who are well established in the field of education and have made a name for themselves are exceptional cases. I’d rather go for teachers with conventional degrees.”

The dean of a university in Pakistan was more concerned about the accreditation of the degree awarding institution rather than the type of degree. He was of the opinion that accredited institutions ensure quality control of their programmes to meet the required standards to earn a good reputation in the market. He opined:

“Very soon distance qualifications will become an increasing option for the teachers and educational institution employers won’t be left with much choice. To gain credibility, the open university in

our country should consider market needs at the time of developing courses and get international accreditation for quality control.”

The HR administrator in India commented:

“My college has a Faculty Appointment Committee and the members consider the suitability of the candidates based on their qualifications, experience, and the skills they have, not where the degree is from.”

Another administrator shared his viewpoint:

“Distance mode is expanding in India because regular universities have been unsuccessful to cater to the demands of the masses, and a time would come when most students would have gone through the distance mode at least once in their life time.”

The two principals and dean interviewed in Pakistan had wavered opinion about distance programmes. The dean considered distance degree as a rear door entry to get a degree. This coincides with the opinion of Yick, Patrick and Costin (2005), who believe that distance degrees are one step down. The dean was concerned that the distance programme should be accredited with a national or international body to

verify and ensure the quality of programmes being offered. Wellman (2000) explains that an accredited institution has to go through the process of on-going inspection, and evaluation to verify that it meets the standards set by the accrediting body for curriculum, faculty, finances, governance and student facilities. Employers in Pakistan voiced that distance degrees would be recognised only with the government's blessing. The view point of senior HR administrators in India was different as they preferred the skills of the teachers rather than the mode through which degrees were acquired.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Although distance education degrees are in demand as they allow individuals with a first or second job as well as those with family commitments to complete the degree at its own pace in their own working environment yet, such degrees are viewed with a doubt due to lack of "interaction among students, between students and instructors, in addition to non-accessible resources" (Raj & Al-Alawneh, 2010, p.1). The findings of this paper support Johnson (2003) that such degrees also serve the needs of the adult population, who would like to have an additional qualification for promotion. Since the role of higher degrees is growing in the workplace, especially in the teaching profession, it is important that space should be created for the interested ones to expand their education (Thompson, 2009). It is confirmed through literature review that the employers to a large extent have failed

to put an unbiased and honest value on degrees earned through distance education as also documented in this research study. As evident from the literature, the 'gatekeepers' have an overall negative perception of distance degrees and this will continue until the scenario reverses, that is, the employers themselves attain distance degrees to understand and realise its value. Meanwhile, this attitude will increase the frustration level of those who are motivated to grow professionally, yet are given a cold shoulder by their employers.

Distance degrees in many South Asian countries are mostly perceived inferior because the 'guru' (teacher) is not in sight to guide the students with her or his knowledge. Secondly, many feel that students' learning is better in a conventional face-to-face environment, forgetting that distance students take double the time to cover the subject matter. However, the employers should not forget that distance courses are more open to public scrutiny than traditional classroom instruction because many distance courses are delivered through mediated programmes that can be accessed easily.

Similarly, a drawback of distance mode as emerged from this study was the credibility of degrees by the employers due to the churning out of fake degrees that are worthless (Ezell & Bear, 2005) in the market. Few employers in the study doubted the value of such degrees as the institution in Pakistan and India were not accredited with any agency to validate the courses that were being offered and questioned the quality of

learning achieved by prospective employees through distance mode.

The study results from Pakistan indicated that many teachers who enrol in distance programmes have teaching responsibilities not only in one school or college, but two or even three jobs to make their ends meet. This raises some issues concerning the interrelationship between their work and study (Evans & Nation, 1993). It nurtures the question of how working teachers find a substantial amount of time to complete their modules and assignments. Evans and Nation (1993) also doubt the extent to which the courses which the teachers follow draw upon and contribute to their professional practice as teachers. We should not forget that a teacher's work is not only demanding in terms of hours of work, but also in terms of emotional demands of working with children and their parents. It is difficult to put a value on all this work in an economic sense, not only because the benefits are difficult to demarcate, but also because these benefits do not need to be set against the costs involved, both individually and socially. To compensate for this loss, employers should support motivated teachers who are interested in professional growth. Though indifferent attitude and lack of support is not common only for distance learners, administrators of almost all public and private sector institutions are quite reluctant to release their teachers for a long term as this creates a teaching void in the already teacher shortage scenario.

It has also been realised that such degrees are appropriate for highly motivated learners who want to progress professionally, but not so for struggling students. This research confirms the quality and value of learning experiences gained from the teachers' point of view as they saw themselves grow professionally in theory and practice, increased self motivation and improvement in skills and knowledge. Enrolling in distance programme allows them flexibility and convenience to fit in their personal commitments. Due to the large class size in developing countries, lecture method is the most acceptable way of teaching and this suits the untrained teachers as well, which in turn, hampers the learning process of the students and nearly all memorise the content to pass the examination. On the other hand, the learners through distance have to read the study guides and readers in order to do their assignments and the end of the programme workshops prove to be most beneficial where practical work dominates. The teachers gave positive rating to the overall process, ignoring accreditation and market value of distance education degrees.

CONCLUSION

Although this study in a way could add to the growing body of research on distance education and harmonises with many research findings that distance education can be equivalent to traditional face-to-face education, the results of this study cannot be generalised to all population. Moreover, the evidence is not sufficient to

conclude that distance education is superior or inferior to traditional education, yet the insights provided in this article may help inform employers of the value of distance education. In spite of them not supporting the teachers while studying, it was quite apparent in this study that the teachers who graduated through the distance programme had developed practical skills, were good in higher engagement skills and had developed positive attitude. Although long established perceptions may take time to change, there has been a steady improvement in the public's perception of distance education. On a positive note, Fogle and Elliott (n.d.) reiterate that as more people attend distance institutions over time and the number of employers coming from such education setting on the hiring side of the desk increases, a rather favourable treatment of distance degrees can be anticipated.

To confirm the validity and acceptability of distance degrees, the distance education institutions have to get accreditation nationally or internationally and it is the responsibility of the government to gauge the reputation of such institutions for rigour and mentored learning experiences, as they contribute in supporting the distance programmes financially. There are high hopes that this issue would be amicably resolved with the timely intervention of the government and mutual dialogue between competent authorities, resulting in a changed attitude of the employers, as well as employees in the education sector. A composite understanding that emerges from the research is that a comprehensive research

needs to be undertaken to study employers' views on distance and conventional education (Adams & DeFleur, 2006; Astani & Ready, 2010; Linardopoulos, 2012). Meanwhile, one can conclude to a certain extent that while distance education may not be superior to or better than traditional face-to-face education, it is not inferior to traditional education.

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