Perceived Factors and Value of Online Master Degrees in Romania

Alina Irina POPESCU

Faculty of International Business and Economics,
Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania
Căderea Bastiliei, Sector 1, Bucharest, Romania, 010374
popescu_i_alina@yahoo.com

Florina Magdalena PÎNZARU

College of Management,
National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania
6 Povernei St., Sector 1, Bucharest, Romania, 010643
florina.pinzaru@facultateademanagement.ro

Lucian ANGHEL

College of Management,
National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania
6 Povernei St., Sector 1, Bucharest, Romania, 010643
lucian.anghel@bcr.ro

Abstract. *In the last five years, online master degrees were introduced in the educational offer by major higher education institutions from Romania. Although there were few pure online master degrees, the demand for such degrees has been continuously growing. More recently, a legislative measure discouraged the existence of a pure online learning degree, despite the success these degrees enjoyed and the positive opinion of employers. In this context, the present study aims to measure the perceived value and satisfaction of online master degrees among graduates of this type of degrees, the factors that influenced their choice to enroll in an online master program, and the perceived opinion of employers towards online master degrees. Findings reveal an overall increased satisfaction and perceived learning among graduates. We also found that the demographic characteristics and the grades students received during the years of study and at the graduation exam (dissertation) are strong predictors of perceived value and satisfaction with online master degrees.*

Keywords: e-learning, online master degree, higher education, perceived value, satisfaction, Romania

Introduction

Online education has gained more and more importance in Romania. Teenagers grew up with the new technologies and thus, they find natural to

learn by using them. On the other hand, adults have started to understand the advantages of the access in real time to knowledge and information, and of the lack of the need to physically move for performing different tasks. In this context, universities from Romania tried to adapt themselves to the requirements of those that wish to study by offering them study programs tailored to their needs. Among the most widely spread formal online education forms in Romania were the online master degrees. The measurement of graduates' satisfaction and perceived value offers important information to university management and policy makers.

Literature review

Online education, or **e-learning**, has generated a paradigm shift in education and learning, determining higher education institutions to reconsider the environments through which they deliver educational content. Online education can be defined as *an approach to teaching and learning that utilizes Internet technologies to communicate and collaborate in an educational context*. According to Dwyer, Barbieri and Doerr (1995) education is revolutionized by the Internet and the use of new technologies leading to the paradigm shift: "the web provides significant new functionality in transmitting information to the student and providing forums for exchange. The web is revolutionizing some areas of study through increased opportunities for learning and alternative formats for information".

Researchers identified several of the fundamental differences between learning online and in a traditional classroom setting: the requirement that students have a certain level of computer skills and equipment in online learning; the lack of availability of audio presentations in online courses; the presence of asynchronous learning rather than requiring students to be in a classroom at a given time and place (McGovern, 2004). Smith (2001) confirmed that one of the main differences in the instructional methods was that the online courses depend on texts to a large extent. Also, online learning is better able to bring in much more information from virtual sources than face-to-face learning.

The issue of effective participant behaviours in online learning was intensely investigated in graduate online courses (Arbaugh, 2000; Swan, 2002; Brower, 2003). The effectiveness of participant behaviours seems to correlate with participants' degree of engagement. Although technology gets much of the attention in online learning, people make online learning environments

productive (Kehrwald, 2008). Online learning instructors need to be more aware of learners' characteristics, and to engage them as authentic and legitimate learners. Higher levels of engagement could be attained by tuning online learning activities and revising educational goals to align them with learners' prior experience, potential and expectations, thus transforming the online learning environment into an appropriate and challenging one.

An emerging body of research addresses the advantages and disadvantages of online learning. In a recent study, Tamashiro (2011) formulated an extensive list of online learning advantages. The most cited were: flexibility of time to work; work at own pace; save time on travel to/from campus; location convenience; better availability of educational resources; leaning new technology; better accessibility of the instructor; and others. Among the disadvantages of online learning Tamashiro (2011) mentioned: lack of face-to-face, personal or social contact with instructor or students; technical problems (including computer, server, network, power), or fear of technical problems; the requirement of too much self-discipline, self-motivation, time-management and organization; computer literacy or keyboarding etc.

Studies on students' perceptions as customers of an online education program as a product were mainly directed towards three distinct areas: faculty-student relationship, satisfaction with course activities, and student-to-student interactions (Brannan, 2005). Dobbs, Waid and del Carmen (2009) studied students' perceptions of online course experiences and reported that students perceived that traditional face-to-face courses were easier than online courses. Wyatt (2003) discovered that students who decided to enrol in online classes because they thought they were more convenient, found the courses more demanding and even overwhelming, and that faculty had higher expectations compared to face-to-face courses.

In a large experimental longitudinal study, Mortagy and Boghikian-Whitby (2010) formulated and tested eight different assertions concerning students' perceptions about online education: (1) online faculty members have low expectations; (2) online faculty members are not available to students; (3) online classes have no faculty-to-student interactions; (4) online faculty don't provide good quality feedback; (5) online students are dissatisfied with course activities; (6) online students do not have flexible time to complete assignments; (7) online students do not use critical thinking skills; and (8) online students feel isolated: there is no student-to-student interactions. Results confirmed the assertions, with the exception of the sixth and the eighth ones. Another

major finding was that the perceptions of online students changed over time, while that of face-to-face students remained fairly constant or showed very little change over time.

Methodology

The study we conducted had the following general research objectives:

- To identify and measure the factors that influence the choice of an online master degree in Romania;
- To measure the degree of satisfaction online master students have towards the program they graduated from;
- To identify the perceptions of online master graduates on the possible employers' opinion regarding the utility of online master degrees in Romania;
- To discover how factors, perceptions and satisfaction differ according to graduates' demographical characteristics (e.g. age, gender, income, family status, work status, number of children), to grades during the years of study, and to dissertation exam grades.

The survey population was identified as all graduates between 2006-2011 from two online Master degree programs (MA in Management and Communication in Business and MA in International Project Management) of the National School for Political and Administrative Studies, Bucharest, Romania. Data were collected from a sample of 190 graduates of the online master programs using a structured questionnaire developed by the researchers and published online. The questionnaire comprised 15 questions, out of which: one filter question, 7 questions with the aim to identify and measure perceptions and satisfaction regarding the online master programs, and 7 questions to capture the demographical characteristics of respondents. Data were collected between March 23rd and April 1st, 2012.

Results and discussion

The breakdown of the sample by demographics demonstrates that women are more likely to enrol in an online master degree than men. The majority of students (31%) that graduated from the two online master programmes were between 25-29 years old; however, there is a very good representation of other age groups. This is consistent with the results obtained by Dubois (2003) that showed that distance learning encourages older people to complete education. The work status of respondents showed that a vast majority 96% was employed. The income levels were selected according to the income levels in Romania and

were expressed in "lei", the Romanian currency. They showed the net monthly income, the most common measure of income used in Romania. The lowest level was considered to be approximately 163 EUR, the minimum wage in Romania; 2 % of the respondents earned less than the minimum wage of 163 EUR. The second income interval (163-325 EUR) was set to include respondents that earned above the minimum age, but below the average wage in Romania. As expected, more than half of the graduates (51%) have high income levels. As regards the family status, most people were married (58%), confirming the results of previous studies that showed that distance education format attracted more married participants than single participants (Frimpong-Kwapong, 2007). Although the majority of graduates were married, most of them indicated to have no children (62%); the rest had one or two children (37%), and three or four children (1%). As such, we can define the *general profile* of a graduate of an online master degree as follows: a young woman (25-34 y.o.), employed, married but without children, with an income level above the average.

Table 1. Variable Labels and Descriptive Statistics

Variable Labels		Frequency (N=190)	Percentage
Gender	Males	47	25
	Females	143	75
Age	Under 24	0	0
	25-29	59	31
	30-34	44	23
	35-39	36	19
	40-44	21	11
	45-50	22	12
	Over 50	8	4
Work status	Employed	182	96
	Un-employed	8	4
Income level	Under 163 EUR	4	2
	163-325 EUR	21	10
	326-581 EUR	56	28
	Over 581 EUR	106	51
	No answer	6	3
Family status	Married	110	58
	Live with partner	38	20
	Single	29	15
	Divorced	11	6
	Widow(-er)	2	1
Number of children	Without children	118	62
	1-2 children	70	37
	3-4 children	2	1
	More	0	0

Factors that influence the choice of an Online Master Degree

A key research objective of this study was to determine the factors that influenced the decision to enrol in an online master degree. Respondents were given a list of factors to evaluate on a Likert scale (1-the least important, 5-the most important). According to Hannay and Newvine (2006), "distance learning programs are generally designed to provide access to higher education for students who cannot attend traditional courses due to employment, marital status, family responsibilities and distance".

Our results show that the most important factors were the flexibility of the programme's schedule (4.53) and the convenience in terms of geographical distance (4.53). A second group of important factors consisted of the attractiveness of the disciplines of study (4.31), the acquisition of specialised skills (4.31) and the university's reputation (4.10). The least important factor was considered to be the perception of lower requirements of faculty (1.84). This factor was tested for importance as previous researches asserted that online students perceived that online classes are easier or faculty members have low expectations (Mortagy & Boghikian-Whitby, 2010). In this respect, Li and Akins (2005) stated that stated "Online teaching and learning is quick and easy". The perception of graduation easiness proved to have a low influence (2.78) in the decision to enrol in an online master degree. This is not consistent with Wyatt (2003) that discovered that some students took online classes because they were easier. Another factor of lower importance that expected is represented by family reasons (2.98). This is consistent with the profile of the students enrolled in the investigated online master degrees, in particular with the lack of minor children.

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations and correlations for variables. The strongest positive correlations were between: the enthusiasm for and curiosity about the e-learning technology and age (.250) and the average grade of the years of study (.154); family reasons and number of children (.262) and age (.151); the attractiveness of study disciplines and work status (.129), age (.127), the average grade of the years of study (.108), and income (.104); faculty's reputation and age (.158); university's reputation and age (.149); and the acquisition of an advanced specialisation and age (.113). The strongest negative correlations were between: family reasons and gender (-.198); convenience and gender (-.183); graduation easiness and gender (-.119); and, flexibility of program's schedule and gender (-.106).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations for Factors

Factors	Mean	SD	Age	Gender	Income	Work status	No. of children	Avg. grade	Dissertation grade	Employees' opinion
Flexibility of program's schedule	4.53	0.69	-.057	-.106	.097	.086	-.096	.001	-.049	-.074
Convenience (no geographical limitations)	4.53	0.94	.078	-.183*	.023	.063	.029	.091	.003	.029
Disciplines' attractiveness	4.31	0.71	.127	.042	.104	.129	-.073	.108	-.005	-.047
Acquisition of specialised skills	4.31	0.83	.113	.021	-.013	.015	.063	.031	.041	-.233**
University's reputation	4.10	0.99	.149*	.028	.016	.047	-.077	.064	.029	-.229**
Faculty's reputation	3.93	1.10	.158*	.083	.008	.082	-.100	.056	.043	-.213**
Lower logistic costs	3.38	1.35	.017	-.016	-.094	.098	-.092	.031	.092	-.070
Enthusiasm for and curiosity about the e-learning technology	3.08	1.17	.250**	-.060	-.038	-.053	-.007	.154*	.037	-.133
Family reasons	2.98	1.60	.151*	-.198**	-.033	-.019	.262**	.068	-.026	-.095
Graduation easiness	2.78	1.29	-.060	-.119	-.020	.025	-.061	-.026	-.072	-.002
Lower requirements of faculty	1.84	0.98	-.133	-.020	-.003	-.007	-.140	-.093	-.082	-.004

Perceived value and satisfaction with the online master degree

In order to assess graduates' satisfaction with the investigated online master degrees, we selected a range of aspects to be evaluated by respondents on a 5-point scale (1-very poor, 5-very good). Findings reveal that 75.8% of respondents rated favourable (good and very good) the learner – instructor interaction; 71.58% rated favourably the learner – learner interaction; 86.8 % rated favourably the learner – interface interaction. Course participant behaviour variables like learner-instructor interaction, learner – learner interaction and learner –interface interaction are explained by several course participant variables like age, income, average grade and dissertation grade (see Table 3). The perceived satisfaction was positively correlated with the age (.204**) and the grade obtained at the dissertation exam (.210**). Also, respondents were generally satisfied with the knowledge they accumulated during the years of study – the perceived learning, variable with significant correlations with age (.227**), number of children (.159*), and the dissertation grade (.171*).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlations for Aspects

Aspects	Mean	SD	Age	Gender	Income	Work status	No. of children	Avg. grade	Dissertation grade	Employees' opinion
Learner – instructor interaction	3.86	1.01	.251**	-.089	-.185*	-.004	.026	.145*	.214**	-.320**
Learner – learner interaction	3.86	0.91	.148*	-.031	-.120	.025	.006	.050	.122	-.229**
Learner – interface interaction	4.16	0.85	.218**	-.139	-.138	-.083	.060	.126	.056	-.206**
Usefulness of disciplines	3.99	0.95	.191**	.081	-.059	-.112	.092	.038	.218**	-.382**
Quality of teaching	3.79	1.01	.233**	-.016	-.080	-.017	.136	.086	.123	-.361**
Quality of biblio-graphic resources	3.78	0.96	.149*	.043	-.013	.116	.080	.079	.103	-.324**
Perceived satisfaction (in general)	3.92	0.92	.204**	.039	-.125	-.076	.070	.099	.210**	-.327**
Perceived learning	3.85	1.00	.227**	.063	-.129	-.085	.159*	.109	.171*	-.349**

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*
** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)*

We were also interested to check what graduates believed to be the opinions of their employers or, of Romanian employers in general, regarding the graduation of an online master programme, as opposed to a face-to-face master program. Most respondents (45.26%) believed that employers would have a rather positive opinion about online master degrees, 36.32% believe that employers are indifferent, and 4.21% believe that employers would have a rather negative opinion regarding the format of the master degree their employees graduated.

Conclusions

The findings of the research demonstrate that several factors strongly influence the choice of an online master degree in Romania, in detriment of an onsite similar degree. Firstly, there are two 'general' factors like the flexibility of schedule and convenience in terms of geographical distance emerged. Secondly, there are factors related to the university's, faculty's and degree's reputation and attractiveness. From the course factors: enthusiasm for and curiosity about the e-learning participant variables, age is better correlated with the

following technology, university's reputation and faculty's reputation; gender with family reasons and convenience. Both the perceived satisfaction of graduation with the master degree in general and the perceived learning proved to be good, confirming the efficiency and the attractiveness of the investigated online master degrees. The fact that students choose an online master degree due to their initial perception of being easier or just to get a diploma did not confirm following our research in the case of the investigated master degrees offered by SNSPA Bucharest. Also, graduates consider that their employees would have a positive opinion on online forms of higher education degrees. Previous researches (Giannoni & Teone, 2003 cited in Yickes, Patrick & Costin, 2005) documented a perceptual disparity in academia that distance education is second best. So far it seems that this is not the perceived opinion of Romanian employers, which acknowledge the benefits of online master degrees.

References

Arbaugh, J. B. (2000 December). How classroom environment and student engagement affect learning in internet-based MBA courses. *Business Communication Quarterly,* 63, 9-26.

Brannan, T. A. (2005). Learner interactivity in higher education: Comparing face-to-face, hybrid, and online instruction. *Distance Learning*, 2 (2), 1-8**.**

Brower, H. H. (2003). On emulating classroom discussion in a distance-delivered OBHR course: Creating an on-line community. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 2 (1), 22–36.

Dobbs, R. R., Waid, C. A., & del Carmen (2009). A. Students' perceptions of online courses the effect of online course experience. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 10 (1), 9-26.

Dubois J. (2003). Major issues in distance learning. *Working Connections*. IT Faculty Development Institute.

Dwyer, D., Barbieri, K., & Doerr, H. (1995). Creating a Virtual Classroom for Interactive Education on the Web. The Third International World Wide Web Conference. Retrieved from http://www.igd.fhg.de/www/www95/

Frimpong-Kwapong, O.A.T. (2007). Widening access to tertiary education for women in Ghana through distance education. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 8 (4).

Hannay, M., & Newvine, T. (2006). Perceptions of Distance Learning: A Comparison of On-line and Traditional Learning. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 2 (1).

Kehrwald, B.A. (2008). Understanding social presence in text-based online learning environments. *Distance Education*, 29 (1), 89-106.

Li, Q., & Akins, M. (2005). Sixteen myths about online teaching and learning in higher education: Don't believe everything you hear. *TechTrends*, 49 (4), 51.

McGovem, G. (2005). Teaching Online vs, Face-to-Face. *Newsletter of American Library Association Continuing Education Network & Exchange Roundtable*, 20 (4).

Mortagy Y., & Boghikian-Whitby S. (2010). A Longitudinal Comparative Study of Student Perceptions in Online Education. *Interdisciplinary Journal of E-Learning and Learning Objects*, 6, 23-44.

Smith, G.G. (2001). Teaching College Courses Online *vs.* Face-to-Face, *The Journal Digital Edition*. Retrieved from http://thejoumal.com/articles/2001/04/01/teaching-college-courses-online-vsfacetoface.aspx.

Swan, K. (2002). Building learning communities in online courses: The importance of interaction. *Education Communication and Information*, 2 (1), 23–49.

Tamashiro, R. (2002). Pros and Cons of Online Learning: Conflicting Perceptions Among Teacher Education Students. Retrieved from www.hiceducation.org

Yick, A. G., Patrick, P., & Costin, A. (2005). Navigating distance and traditional higher education: Online faculty experiences. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 6 (2).

Wyatt, G. (2003). Satisfaction, academic rigor and interaction: perceptions of online instruction. *Education*, 125 (3), 460-468.