



# The Acceptability of Online University Degrees in the Arab Academia

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## Abstract

The main objective of the present study is to investigate the extent to which the online university degrees are accepted in the Arab academia; moreover it attempts to investigate the factors affecting the acceptability of such degrees in the Arab Academia. Data were gathered through an online questionnaire conducted to a sample of (120) faculty members in Arab universities. The results assured what has been emphasized in the literature, that the online university degrees are not highly preferred by faculty members in Arab Academia as criteria to be accepted in universities for work or further graduate study. No significant differences were found in most of items of the questionnaire. The major findings of the study indicated that the most affecting factors are: non-recognition of the degrees obtained online as qualifications for getting jobs by some employers, the Lack of practice of student's activities in e-learning programs compared to traditional ones, and the commonality of the belief that e-learning programs are rear doors for getting university degrees. The results of the present study will help students to consider the acceptability of the degrees they will get online before being involved in such programs.



## ملخص الدراسة باللغة العربية

يمثل التوسع في برامج الدراسة الإلكترونية عبر شبكة الإنترنت أحد أهم التوجهات العالمية في العصر الراهن، وفي ضوء ذلك استهدفت الدراسة الحالية التعرف على مدى تقبل الشهادات الجامعية المتحصل عليها عن طريق التعلم الإلكتروني في الأوساط الأكاديمية العربية كمؤهلات للعمل أو استكمال الدراسة، وكذلك التعرف على العوامل المؤثرة في تقبل مثل تلك الدرجات الجامعية في الأوساط الأكاديمية العربية. واستخدمت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي من خلال استبانة إلكترونية طبقت على عينة قوامها (120) من أعضاء هيئات التدريس وهيئات المعاونة بجامعة مصر والخليج العربي. وأكدت نتائج الدراسة الحالية ما أشارت إليه الأدبيات في المجال، أن الدرجات الجامعية الإلكترونية لا تحظى بقدر كبير من التفضيل في الأوساط الأكاديمية العربية كمؤهلات للعمل أو استكمال الدراسات العليا. وأسفرت نتائج الدراسة عن عدم وجود فروق دالة إحصائية في معظم عبارات الاستبانة مما يؤكد على مستوى عال من الاتساق بين أفراد العينة. وكانت أكثر العوامل تأثيرا في تقبل الدرجات الجامعية الإلكترونية في الأوساط الأكاديمية العربية: عدم الاعتراف بمثل تلك الدرجات كمؤهلات للحصول على عمل من قبل بعض أصحاب الأعمال؛ وقلة ممارسة الأنشطة الطلابية بتلك البرامج مقارنة بمشيلاتها التقليدية؛ وشيوع الاعتقاد بأن مثل تلك البرامج تمثل أبوبا خلفية للحصول على درجات جامعية.



## Introduction

The phenomenon of university online degrees has grown to become one of the main features of higher education. Many traditional universities offer online programs in addition to traditional ones. Some universities have completely changed their programs to be offered only online. Millions of people have completed college courses online. Large numbers of graduates have earned degrees by taking advantage of these new educational opportunities. The possibility of getting one's higher education online has broadened the opportunity before those who are pressed in time, living in rural isolated areas, working professionals, military personnel in distant locations, and other people with busy schedules to earn university credits.

In the past few years online enrollment has been growing substantially faster than overall higher education enrollment. The expectation of academic leaders has been that online enrollment would continue its substantial growth in the future. For example in the United States over 4.6 million students were taking at least one online course; there is a 17 percent increase in the enrolment rate which exceeds the 1.2 percent growth of the overall higher education student population. Moreover, more than one in four higher education students now take at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Another reason for the expansion of online degrees, or at least traditional universities offering of online courses, is that the number of online course offerings by traditional colleges and universities has not kept pace accommodating the demand of degree-seeking students. Some estimates show that distance education has expanded at a rate that is more than 10 times the growth of the general postsecondary market (Adams, 2008).

In Arab countries many universities began to offer online programs, either entirely online, or through blended learning. Many countries launched new electronic or virtual universities such as the Egyptian E-learning University and the Saudi Electronic University. The Arab Open University in Kuwait has offered distance education since 2004. The University offers more than 50 online courses in 12 programs under 4 major faculties: Economics, Information Systems, Education, and Administrative Sciences (Al-Fadhli, 2009).

The steady expansion of online education has created considerable controversy regarding the quality of the instruction, educational outcomes, the reputation of the providing institutions, and regulatory policies used to evaluate and manage these important resources. Increasing demand for well-educated workers in the private sector has helped to fuel the steady rise of for-profit programs and enrollments in online degree programs. This upward trend is likely to continue because the demand for employees with college degrees is projected to rise significantly during the decade

ahead, particularly in managerial, computer engineering, and accounting occupations (Adams & DeFleur, 2006).

The National Commission of Online Learning has developed a set of observations about successful strategic online learning initiatives, which include the following (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, 2009, p 5):

Online learning programs may work most effectively as a core component of institutional strategic planning and implementation.

Online learning initiatives benefit from ongoing institutional assessment and review due to their evolving and dynamic nature.

Online learning activities are strengthened by the centralization of some organizational structures and administrative functions that support and sustain these programs.

Online learning programs overseen by academic affairs units may be more readily accepted and may be more easily integrated into the fabric of the institution.

Online learning programs need reliable financing mechanisms for sustainability and growth.

Online learning programs succeed with consistent and adequate academic, administrative, and technological resources for faculty and students.

Online learning programs have the capacity to change campus culture and become fully integrated if presidents, chancellors, chief academic officers, and other senior campus leaders are fully engaged in the delivery of “messages” that tie online education to fundamental institutional missions and priorities.

In spite of the importance and widespread of online learning, there is a challenge that still needs to be met and considered by universities and institutions granting online degrees. This challenge is: whether the degrees they offer online are accepted in the labour market or not. And that is the main objective of the present study. The findings of the study of Linardopoulos (2012) revealed that there is a much greater likelihood for a candidate with an online degree to be viewed less favorably for employment purposes compared to the candidate with a face-to-face degree.

The issue of accepting online university degrees is controversial. While many researchers maintain that the quality of education via online study is clearly inferior, Others claim the opposite and insist that knowledge acquired through online distance learning is equal to, or even superior to, that obtained in traditional settings. Joy & Garcia (2000) presented examples of both sides as a proof for the controversy perspective regarding the issue of equality of online and traditional degree.

The acceptability of degrees that have been earned entirely or partially online has become a new area of research, which attempts to investigate whether distance learning and traditional degrees are equal in the eyes of “gatekeepers” in different situations - those who review the credentials of

applicants for various kinds of openings. The main objective of such area is not to find out why students choose to enroll in those programs of study. The question that these studies are concerned with has been whether gatekeepers see online degrees as having the same value for their purposes as a degree earned in a traditional residential program (Raj & Al-Alawneh, 2010).

### Study Design

The objective of the present study is to investigate whether the online university degrees are accepted for getting work or recognized for further graduate study in the Arab academia. The study attempts to answer the following questions:

- To what extent the online university degrees are accepted in the Arab Academia from the perspectives of faculty members in Arab universities?
- Are there any significant differences regarding the acceptance of online university degrees in the Arab academia according the the study variables which are: academic position, place of work, academic specialization, place of getting the highest academic degree, gender, studying online courses and teaching online courses?
- How can universities granting online degrees overcome the challenge of the acceptability of online university degrees in the Arab academia?

### Literature Review

The acceptability of online university degrees is a debatable issue. A number of studies revealed that such degrees are distrustful. Carnevale (2005) stated that employers are still skeptical about the notion of earning a degree online and generally prefer applicants who hold degrees from traditional colleges and universities. Given the choice between two equal candidates for a job, employers indicated that they would hire the person with a traditional degree over someone with a degree from a virtual institution with online degree.

In searching for reasons behind the reticence in accepting online degree credentials, Columbaro & Monaghan (2009) mentioned that among these reasons: lack of rigor in acceptance requirements and learning processes, lack of face-to-face interactions which is one of the skills needed in majority of positions, increased potential for academic dishonesty, association with diploma mills which refer to the non academic or unaccredited institutes that offer fake or less quality degrees, and concerns about online students' true commitment evident from regularly venturing to a college or university physical location, considered by some to be an important part of the educational experience.

The results of DeFleur & Adams (2004) indicated that, when the respondents were asked to choose between an applicant with a traditional degree and another (candidate) with an online degree, 96% (258 managers) indicated they would choose the candidate with the traditional degree

for employment in their organizations. Only 4% (11 respondents) selected candidates with the online degree. In the second pairing, the respondents were asked to choose either an applicant with a traditional degree or an applicant with half of the course work completed online. Here, the answers were less dramatic but still very clear. That is, 75% (201 respondents) indicated that they would prefer the applicant with a traditional degree. About 4% of the respondents did not answer this question, but some of respondents choose to provide detailed written comments instead. The remaining 19% (51 respondents) selected the candidate with the mix of traditional and online coursework.

The findings of Seibold (2007) indicated some major themes for the employers' perception of online education. Four themes were concerned with online versus traditional education. They were: online education is convenient, but it lacks interactivity; online education increases student responsibility; participants prefer a hybrid or mixed media approach and the future of online education is positive. One theme was concerned with non-profit versus for-profit online education, which was each kind of institution has its own mission. Two themes were concerned with the impact of online education on interview and hiring process. They were: online education impacts the hiring process and there is no need for diploma classification for online education.

Jonathan Adams, either on his own or with others conducted some studies that dealt with the acceptability of online university degrees. DeFleur & Adams (2004) investigated the acceptability of credits earned online as credentials for getting acceptance in graduate programs. Adams & DeFleur (2005) studied the acceptability of online degrees as credits for their holders to get a university position. Adams & DeFleur (2006) investigated the acceptability of online degrees as credits for applying for positions in business. Adams, DeFleur & Heald (2007) investigated the acceptability of online degrees as credits for getting positions in the field of health care. Adams (2008) attempted to shed light on the factors limiting the acceptability of online courses and degrees.

There are some factors that could influence online degree acceptance in the hiring process, among which: the name recognition/reputation of the degree-granting university and its appropriate level and type of accreditation, the fact that online graduates were required to be more self-directed and disciplined, the candidates' relevant work experiences, whether the online graduates were being considered for promotion within an organization or if they were vying for new positions elsewhere or in a new field (Columbaro & Monaghan,2009).

Roberts (2009) indicated that the matter regarding the acceptance of online degrees in the labor market has changed. There are major reasons for this change. First, many traditional schools are now offering online courses and distant learning programs. Statistically, 90% of traditional schools already offer or are in the planning stages to offer online programs. Online degrees are now

being associated with well known colleges that have already established a prestigious reputation that employers can better relate to. Also, as the number of online programs increases, so does the competition and in turn the demand for higher standards within program expectations, delivery and outcomes. Second, employers become more aware of the demand and benefits tying into the completion of an online degree. They identify the technological experience, self discipline and motivation. They are also aware that this educational approach requires efficiency in virtual communication and creativity in seeking resources and networking. In today's modern world, these are often skills that are sought out by employers and more easily displayed through successfully earning an online degree.

## Methodology

The study gathered its data through an online questionnaire which consists of three parts: the first was dedicated to gather demographic data about participants. The second, which includes sixteen items, investigated the factors affecting the acceptability of online university degrees in the Arab academia. The third was an open-ended question for the respondent to imagine him/herself as a member of a university committee to sort three applicants for a position or further graduate study; the first got his/her degree traditionally via face to face study, the second got his/her degree through blended learning, while the third got his/her degree entirely online. The link of the questionnaire was sent to participants via e-mail, Twitter and Facebook accounts. Completed copies of the questionnaire were received from 120 respondents. The distribution of the sample according to the variables is given in Table (1) and figure (1). Data were analyzed using SPSS version 16. Means, T-test and frequencies were used in data analysis.

Table (1) Characteristics of Survey Respondents

	Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
position <sup>(1)</sup>	Staff	84	70
	Assistant	36	30
Place of Work	Egypt	82	68.3
	Gulf States	38	31.7
Academic Specialization	Theoretical	82	68.3
	Practical	38	31.7



Place of academic degree	Country	106	88.3
	Outside	14	11.7
Gender	Male	86	71.7
	Female	34	28.3
Studying online courses	Yes	34	28.3
	No	86	71.7
Teaching online courses	Yes	20	16.7
	No	100	83.3
Total		120	100%

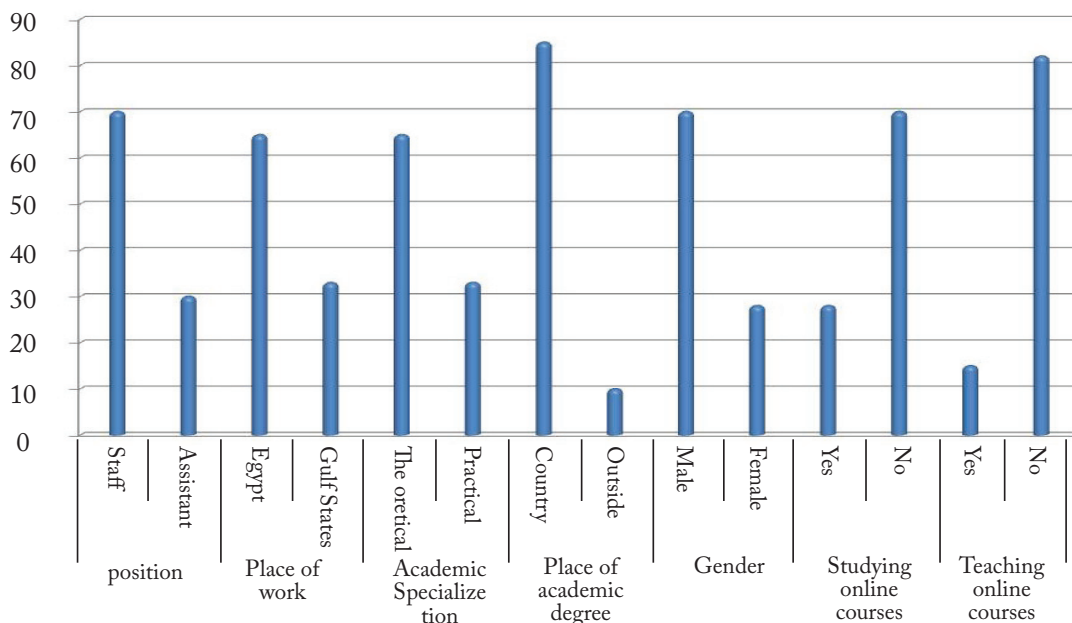


Figure (1) Distribution of Survey Respondents

## Results and Discussion

Results of this study seems to be in line with the literature reviewed in that the online university degrees are not equal to traditional ones, and still not highly accepted by faculty in the



Arab academia as credits to get a position or acceptance for graduate study. The results indicated that (62.3%) of the respondents agreed on the factors mentioned in the questionnaire, against (18.9%) of the respondents that disagreed and strongly disagreed. The following table presents the results of the whole questionnaire.

Table(2) The results of the questionnaire

Items	Strongly disagree		disagree		Neutral		agree		Strongly agree		Total
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	
1	2	1.7	16	13.3	18	15.0	72	60.0	12	10.0	436
2	0	0.0	20	16.7	20	16.7	64	53.3	16	13.3	436
3	6	5.0	24	20.0	16	13.3	52	43.3	22	18.3	420
4	8	6.7	36	30.0	30	25.0	32	26.7	14	11.7	368
5	4	3.3	20	16.7	20	16.7	58	48.3	18	15.0	426
6	8	6.7	12	10.0	8	6.7	52	43.3	40	33.3	464
7	0	0.0	12	10.0	16	13.3	64	53.3	28	23.3	468
8	4	3.3	18	15.0	38	31.7	42	35.0	18	15.0	412
9	4	3.3	12	10.0	20	16.7	48	40.0	36	30.0	460
10	2	1.7	6	5.0	20	16.7	66	55.0	26	21.7	468
11	8	6.7	40	33.3	28	23.3	38	31.7	6	5.0	354
12	4	3.3	30	25.0	18	15.0	54	45.0	14	11.7	404
13	4	3.3	24	20.0	30	25.0	56	46.7	6	5.0	396
14	4	3.3	12	10.0	18	15.0	58	48.3	28	23.3	454
15	0	0.0	10	8.3	38	31.7	50	41.7	22	18.3	444
16	2	1.7	12	10.0	22	18.3	54	45.0	30	25.0	458
Total	60	3.1	304	15.8	360	18.8	860	44.8	336	17.5	6868
	18.9		18.8		62.3						

The following figure shows the percentage of agreement and disagreement of the total results.

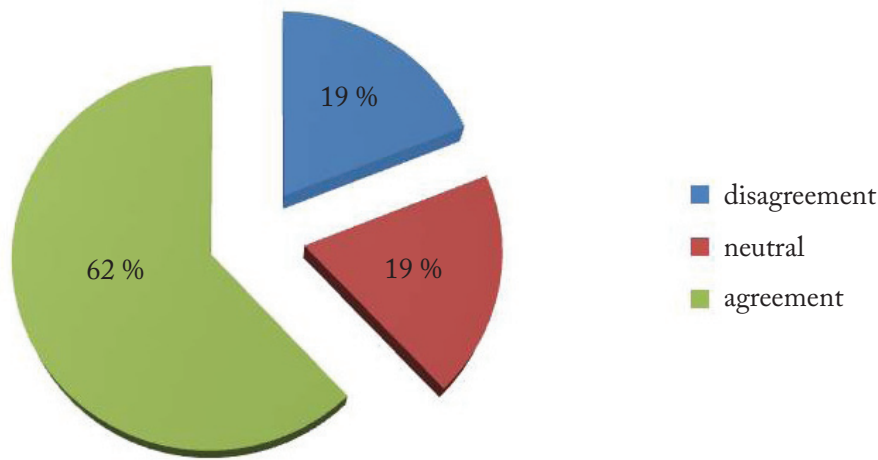


Figure (2) The percentage of the results

The sorting of the items of the questionnaire indicated that the most affecting factor is the non-recognition of the degrees obtained online as qualifications for getting jobs by some employers. This can be interpreted in the light of considering that getting a university degree is one of the safest ways to get a position. The second most affecting factor is the Lack of practice of student's activities in e-learning programs compared to traditional ones. This result has been assured in the abovementioned literature. The third most affecting factor is the commonality of the belief that e-learning programs are backdoors for getting university degrees, and this may be interpreted in the light of the increase of the demand on higher education and the shortage of the opportunities of getting such degrees. The following table shows the sorting the items of the questionnaire.

Table (3) Sorting the items of the questionnaire

Item	Degree	Mean	Sorting
7- Non- recognition of the degrees obtained online as qualifications for getting jobs by some employers.	468	3.90	1
10- Lack of practice of student's activities in e-learning programs compared to traditional ones.	468	3.90	2
6- The commonality of the belief that e-learning programs are backdoors for getting university degrees.	464	3.87	3
9- Lack of human direct communication in e-learning programs compared to traditional ones.	460	3.83	4
16- The inferiority of social perspective for online university degrees compared to traditional ones.	458	3.82	5

14- Lack of trust of employers in the skills and competences needed for jobs among online university degree holders.	454	3.78	6
15- The regulations of some traditional universities don't allow online university degree holders to join them for further and graduate studies.	444	3.70	7
1- Lack of trust in criteria of acceptance for e-learning programs.	436	3.63	8
2- Lack of trust in learning and educational practices in e-learning programs.	436	3.63	9
5- Lack of trust in evaluation processes in e-learning programs.	426	3.55	10
3- Lack of trust in Arab universities that provide e-learning programs.	420	3.50	11
8- Depending some of such programs on less qualified teaching staff.	412	3.43	12
12- Lack co-learning activities in e-learning programs compared to traditional ones.	404	3.37	13
13- Dissimilarity of learning content in e-learning programs compared to traditional ones.	396	3.30	14
4- Lack of trust in foreign universities that provide e-learning programs.	368	3.07	15
11- Lack of trust in academic content produced in e-learning programs.	354	2.95	16

Regarding the statistically significant differences according to the study variables, the analysis of data (t-test) revealed there were statistically significant differences according to the variable of the study as follows:

According to the variable of position: in item 3 “Lack of trust in Arab universities that provide e-learning programs” ( $T= 1.316$ ; d.f. =118;  $p=.048$ ); item 6 “The commonality of the belief that e-learning programs are backdoors for getting university degrees” ( $T= 3.161$ ; d.f. =118;  $p=.016$ ); item 7 “Non- recognition of the degrees obtained online as qualifications for getting jobs by some employers” ( $T= 1.396$ ; d.f. =118;  $p=.031$ ); item 9 “Lack of human direct communication in e-learning programs compared to traditional ones” ( $T= 0.964$ ; d.f. =118;  $p=.002$ ); and item 10 “Lack of practice of student’s activities in e-learning programs compared to traditional ones” ( $T= 1.770$ ; d.f. =118;  $p=.014$ ).

According to the variable of place of work: in item 7 “Non- recognition of the degrees obtained

online as qualifications for getting jobs by some employers” ( $T = -1.927$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .031$ ); item 9 “Lack of human direct communication in e-learning programs compared to traditional ones” ( $T = -0.071$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .001$ ); and item 10 “Lack of practice of student’s activities in e-learning programs compared to traditional ones” ( $T = -2.680$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .018$ ).

According to the variable of academic specialization: in item 1 “Lack of trust in criteria of acceptance for e-learning programs” ( $T = -3.320$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .000$ ); item 5 “Lack of trust in evaluation processes in e-learning programs” ( $T = -0.231$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .014$ ); item 6 “The commonality of the belief that e-learning programs are backdoors for getting university degrees” ( $T = 1.323$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .003$ ); and item 9 “Lack of human direct communication in e-learning programs compared to traditional ones” ( $T = 0.938$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .002$ ).

According to the variable of place of getting the degree: in item 2 “Lack of trust in learning and educational practices in e-learning programs” ( $T = -4.315$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .000$ ); item 3 “Lack of trust in Arab universities that provide e-learning programs” ( $T = -3.963$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .012$ ); item 4 “Lack of trust in foreign universities that provide e-learning programs” ( $T = 1.121$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .002$ ); item 10 “Lack of practice of student’s activities in e-learning programs compared to traditional ones” ( $T = -2.110$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .017$ ); item 16 “The inferiority of social perspective for online university degrees compared to traditional ones” ( $T = -1.164$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .003$ ); and total questionnaire degree ( $T = -2.930$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .039$ ).

According to the variable of gender only in item 6 “The commonality of the belief that e-learning programs are backdoors for getting university degrees” ( $T = 1.526$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .033$ ).

According to the variable of studying online courses: in item 5 “Lack of trust in evaluation processes in e-learning programs” ( $T = 2.009$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .010$ ); item 6 “The commonality of the belief that e-learning programs are backdoors for getting university degrees” ( $T = -0.813$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .012$ ); and item 14 “Lack of trust of employers in the skills and competences needed for jobs among online university degree holders” ( $T = -1.582$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .037$ ).

According to the variable of teaching online courses: in item 1 “Lack of trust in criteria of acceptance for e-learning programs” ( $T = 0.495$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .037$ ); item 5 “Lack of trust in evaluation processes in e-learning programs” ( $T = 1.476$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .005$ ); item 7 “Non- recognition of the degrees obtained online as qualifications for getting jobs by some employers” ( $T = -1.258$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .000$ ); item 8 “Depending some of such programs on less qualified teaching staff” ( $T = -2.888$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .008$ ); item 9 “Lack of human direct communication in e-learning programs compared to traditional ones” ( $T = -2.811$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .008$ ); and item 10 “Lack of practice of student’s activities in e-learning programs compared to traditional ones” ( $T = -2.253$ ;  $d.f. = 118$ ;  $p = .003$ ).

The responses of participants on the open-ended question indicated that the most preferred kind of degrees for hiring or acceptance in graduate programs is that obtained through blended programs (44%), then those degrees got via traditional study in traditional universities (36%), and

the least preferred kind of degrees is that of the degrees got completely online. The following figure shows the percentage of the results on the open-ended question.

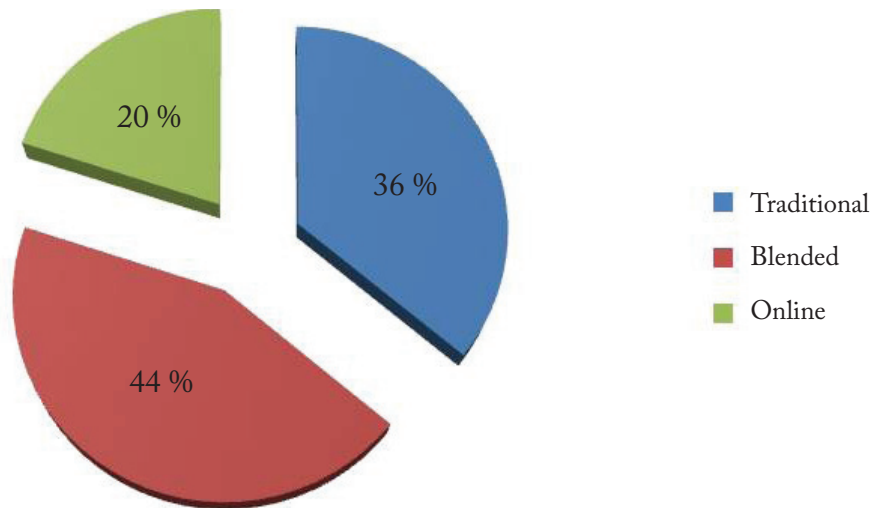


Figure (3) The results of the open-ended question

Ten respondents indicated that it is not the issue of the kind of the degree which determines their selection, but the competencies and skills needed for the position or study are the most crucial criteria for the preference, coping with what was stated by Roberts (2009) that “in today’s modern world, these are often skills that are sought out by employers and more easily displayed through successfully earning an online degree”.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the issue of accepting online university degrees is one of the main challenges that need to be considered by universities and institutions which offer such programs and courses. Reviewing the related literature revealed that this challenge is about to be addressed in the developed countries, while in the Arab countries, especially in the Arab academia the matter needs more and more effort to accept these degrees. The Arab universities should consider the academic accreditation for their online courses and programs as a mean for gaining the trust of community on one hand and the recognition of employers on the other.





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