

Executives Trends towards Joining Distance Learning Programs

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Abstract: The increased interest in Virtual learning programs across the nation emphasizes the merits of these programs over the traditional ones, with an opportunity provided to executives for getting a higher degree without joining Institutes and improving their careers. This paper explores the reasons of executive trends towards joining Virtual programs when they have traditional system as a powerful alternative of learning and also throws light on the importance of Virtual degrees in job market. A survey has been conducted through questionnaires to conclude about the trends of students enrolled in Virtual programs.

Keywords: Distance learning, Incentive Structures, Career Development
JEL Classification: I26, I21

1. Introduction

Keeping in view the different modes of learning, Wild (1994) defined that by the end of 2020 every education and training programme will be available in three modes, that are full time, part time and distance learning. Distance education can be explained as source of knowledge along with advancement of technology outside the traditional boundaries. Some explain distance learning as extension of class room environment in term of remote location (Long distance technology 1990). A more comprehensive definition has been provided by Ian Mugridge (1991), who states that it is:

"A form of education in which there is normally a separation between teacher and learner and thus one in which other means the printed and written word, the telephone, computer conferencing or teleconferencing, for example are used to bridge the physical gap."

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A simpler definition of distance learning would be that distance education should make easy provision of whatever educational opportunities are needed by anyone, anywhere, at any time. Based upon the needs of the population, distance education is imparted from traditional learning due to the following characteristics:

Extensive use of media,

- ❖ A complete separation of learner and tutor,
- ❖ Promote two-way communication,
- ❖ Provide an alternative to traditional education system (Keegan, 1996)

Virtual learning is a term frequently used interchangeably with distance learning, online learning, e-learning, or Web-based learning. What should be the mode of the study; the end result will be the increased educational opportunities for broader segments of population that will accommodate their different situations and needs. Keeping in view the different needs of the students, Virtual programs are offered to those who are not willing to enrol themselves in traditional learning system due to limited availability of time which ceases them to complete the credit hours demanded by traditional programs. Another reason might be the need of degree for career improvement without leaving the jobs because of the need for the monthly salary (Larsen, 1999; McCallister & Matthews, 2001). Other reason might affect the size of the potential market for virtual programs where customer is living national or international. Therefore, Virtual programs are more suitable for those who need to improve their careers within the same organization or for elderly and disabled people who cannot easily move and go to campuses. The main focus of this paper is to emphasize on the pre and post trends of executives towards joining virtual programs.

As far as the Virtual learning is concerned, there seems an increased trend of enrolment during past few years. This may be due to the fact that virtual programs tailored to the needs of the students.

As compared to the increased interest in such programs, the results are not very much favourable as only 7-10% students were able to get the degrees after completing virtual programs. This might be due to the fact that more students enrolled in this program only to get degrees for career development and their focus is not learning. Therefore, they are not very much careful about grades as they only need a degree to enhance their careers. Also they are unable to do justice with their job and learning at the same time. For this reasons, grades are not comparable to traditional learning where student teacher interaction makes this point more favourable for traditional system. Same is the case with AIOU. This paper also attempts to explore the actual motive and market acceptance of this degree as well.

The questionnaire was designed to explore the competitive edge of virtual programs over traditional ones, the reasons of joining is either career development or learning, impact of virtual education on job skills and career development and HR executives ratings of Virtual degrees in job market.

As the main purpose of the paper is to analyze the effects of pre and post attitudes for joining virtual programs, the results are as per our expectations. The results clearly show that most of the executives enrolled in Virtual programs have least purpose of learning and most for career enhancement. They take this degree for granted. Also HR Executives ranking of virtual degree in job market do not carry the same weight-age as traditional degrees. In the end, future implications are given to define a strategy that will be helpful to change the prevailing trend and to attract more and more executives with the goal to enhance their learning rather than career development.

2. Literature review

Talking about the dilemma of “Education in Pakistan”, Khan and Mehmood (1997) focused upon the need of learning to survive in today’s age of rapid globalization. He agreed that primary schooling

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provide knowledge practically and intellectually but he also assisted on the need for both conventional financial and physical resources, as well as for new and innovative concepts and techniques. He concluded that for countries like Pakistan where education is not linked to economic prosperity, a graduate degree instead of providing a secure future will guarantee unemployment in real sense. Traditional programs, along with its major drawbacks for those who want to learn but not having adequate time to fulfil the credit hours, ceases them to be at graduate level thus guaranteeing unemployment.

Virtual programs have met the needs of those who not only want to earn but also tried to learn side by side for improving their careers. Focusing on the improved need to develop a strategy for increasing the literacy and also keeping in view the demand of the executives for career development, Virtual learning came into being to provide world-class education. Since the emergence of virtual learning, many worldwide studies have been conducted emphasizing upon the merits of virtual programs for executives.

From Pakistan perspective, the driving force behind the concept of Virtual education is the lack of IT faculty in particular and other fields in general, at any academic institution in Pakistan which leads towards the severely compromises the quality of education being imparted. In Addition to this, quality staff is only present at few very highly ranked institutions where, access is not easy and the cost of education is out of the reach for common man. Virtual University of Pakistan (VU) collects the scattered intellectual resources on a single platform and then makes their expertise available to students across the length and breadth of the country as well as to students overseas, all at a very affordable cost.

The main intention of doing all this is to produce material using variety of media and delivery mechanisms, to test which are the most suitable for use by Virtual Universities. Similarly, virtual education uses both synchronous and asynchronous presentation technologies and course book technologies to provide basic learning environment function.

Nixon and Helms (2002) studied on the future of Corporate Universities and concluded that future of such Universities involved web-based learning. The future of corporate universities are also associated with the challenges to maintain current technology with advancing technology; therefore in order to ensure the creditability and legitimacy of corporate universities, official recognition and evaluation of program will become more important to ensure. The facilities that Virtual programs provide as an alternative to traditional learning programs is its flexible delivery mechanism of information and communication technologies and also the convenience to the learners providing them exposure with emerging technologies (Hussain, 2008). As a biggest institute of distance learning, Allama Iqbal Open University has appropriate infrastructure and enough potential to provide access to the right to education on large scale since it can meet the educational needs demanded by the people irrespective of their circumstances and living conditions. Secondly, AIOU addresses the issue of access and equality particularly for the female population living in rural or culturally restricted areas of the country.

Therefore, it can be used as a strategy to provide the right education at all levels to all individuals of Pakistan (Hussain, 2008). Emphasizing upon the role of distance learning in promoting education for no gender biasness, Hussain (2008) concluded that distance education provides equal opportunities to all individuals of the society. It is more feasible for female population to cater their academic needs particularly to those belonging to culturally restricted areas. Distance learning is an appropriate strategy to address the issue of gender discrimination in Pakistan.

In a comparative study on AIOU “Executive student’s Attitude towards Technological Change” results indicate that student feel distance learning a simple and easy way to get skilful by understanding the virtual methodology of learning. Learning through internet is pleasant and interesting experience for them as well as regarding the maximum use of technology and communication means in learning environment, they feel social obligation from friends, class fellows,

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teachers and other associates (Rashid & Riaz, 2003). Since, no focus has been made on the issue of actual motive of executives towards joining virtual programs, this paper attempts to focus on the issue.

3. Data and Methodology

Primary data was collected through questionnaires to conclude about the trends of students enrolled in Virtual programs. We attempted to get answered by 100 executives. The questionnaire was based on five point Likert scale developed by Rensis Likert. This scale enables the respondents to answer according to the intensity of their attitude. Initially, 30 questionnaires were distributed as pilot testing, to check the reliability and validity of questionnaire. Then it was distributed to target group of respondents. The target group was expected to answers on the following issues:

- ❖ First, the emphasis was made to view whether the virtual degree has made any contribution to executives' career development and what is the demand of virtual executives in job market?
- ❖ Second those which are currently studying under such programs. The intention was to explore the reasons of joining virtual programs. The focus was on the issue that what factors ceases them to join the virtual programs when an attractive and more traditional system is available?

The sample executives were taken from two universities, AIOU and Virtual university of Pakistan. The students doing job along with study has been selected to answer so that they can respond to the need of the research work well. 200 questionnaires have been answered. The survey is conducted in different campuses of Virtual University and AIOU.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

Demographical analysis shows that 55% of respondents were between age 20-25, while 32% were between age 26-30 and remaining belongs to age group of 31-42 (13%) which means that virtual education serves the purpose of education for all beyond any age group. Reason of the young ages to join Virtual programs could be that they want to become the earning hand at the same time and also try to get knowledge at cheaper cost as well. Being the male dominated society, 71% questionnaires were answered by male, while female ratio is only 29%. This could be the reason that most families do not want their females to join co-education programs even through distance learning. 30% of the respondents were married. It concluded that married people who are unable to meet the needs of their families within the same salary, they want to earn more for which they want an extra degree to improve within the same organization. Due to the emerging technologies and services offered by banking sector there is a high growth in service sector. May be due to the reason individuals working in service sector are more interested to enhance their knowledge and skill by enrolling themselves in distance studies. Total of 41% students surveyed were from service sector while the second highest figures is from marketing services 23%. The distribution of salary scale clearly shows that individuals who cannot afford to pay more in case of traditional system are more interested in distance learning for career development as it is a cost effective, time saving and flexible mechanism of learning delivery. Table 1 shows the demographic analysis of the executives.

Table 1: Demographical Analysis

Age	20-25	55%
	26-30	32%
	31-42	13%
Gender	Male	71%
	Female	29%
Marital Status	Single	70%
	Married	30%

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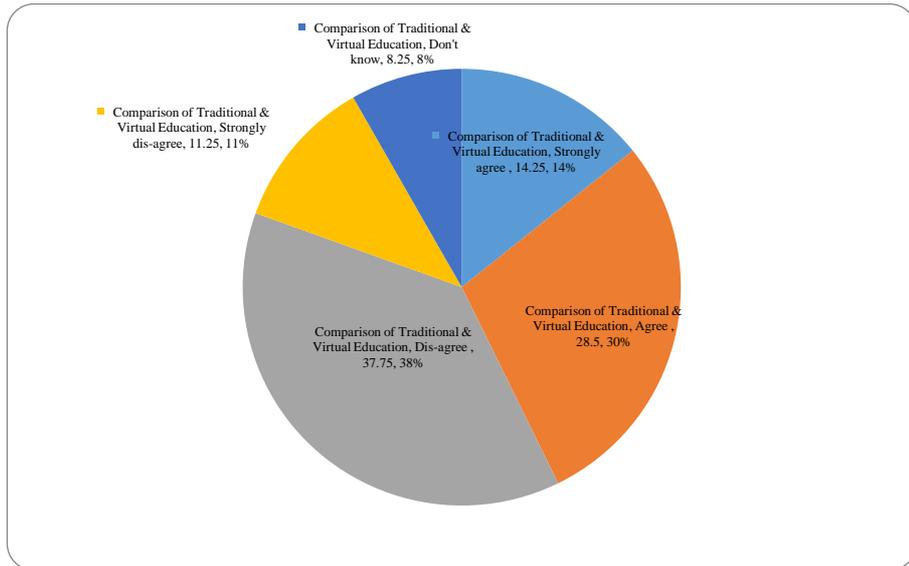
Occupation	Govt.	4%
	Marketing	23%
	Manufacturing	17%
	Service	41%
	Others	15%
Salary	Below 10,000	17%
	10,000-15,000	26%
	15,000-20,000	32%
	20,000-25,000	13%
	25,000-30,000	12%

Source: Demographic Analysis on the basis of Questionnaire Responses

4.2 Analysis

The analysis of descriptive variables shows the mixed trends in some cases. In a set of the questions about the comparison of the Traditional and Virtual systems (Figure 1), 37.75% students disagree that virtual programs provide the learning in same effective way as traditional can. They are in a view that in the absence of student teacher direct interaction and due to the communication gap, virtual learning is not as effective as traditional is. Almost 28.50% students are positive about the usefulness and ease of study for virtual system. They think that direct communication is not as much necessary because they have to take it as opportunity cost for the continuation of job along with study. The graph given below states the results gathered from the answered of the students.

Figure 1: Comparison of Traditional & Virtual Education



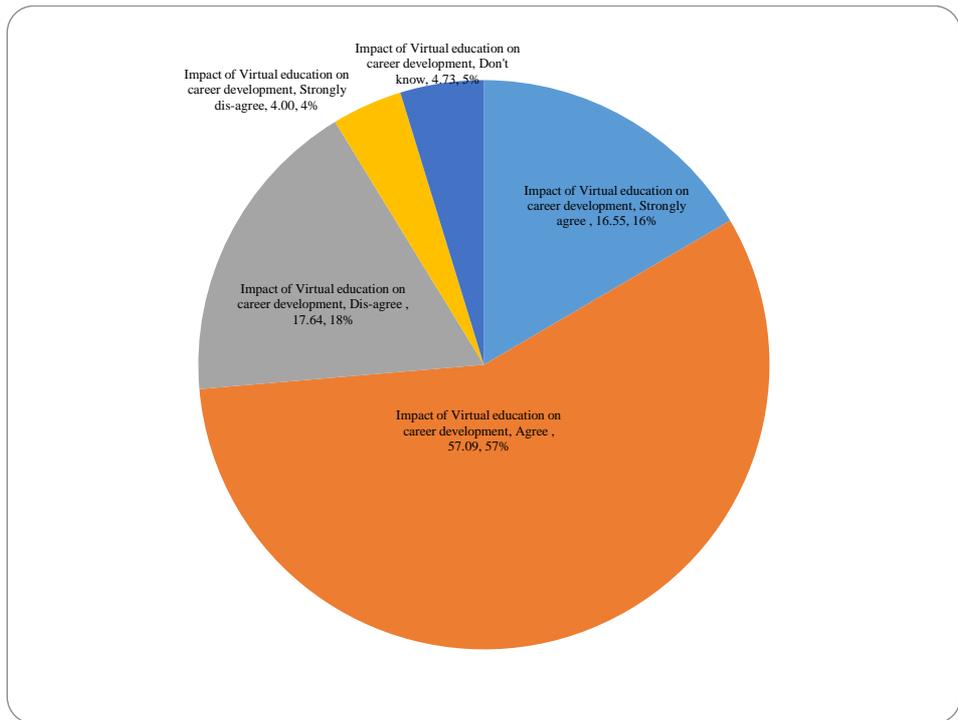
Source: Pie Diagram for Analysis of Descriptive Variables

In another set of questions (Figure 2), where it has been asked to provide consensus about the impact of virtual education on career development, nearly 57.09% agree that virtual education have a positive impact on career development. As students become used to be self-planned and hardworking that will enhance their job development and also have a positive effect on job search. While 17% disagree about the impact of virtual degree on career enhancement. This clearly indicates that students join virtual programs for career development and learning is a secondary motive.

Figure 2: Impact of Virtual Education on Career Development

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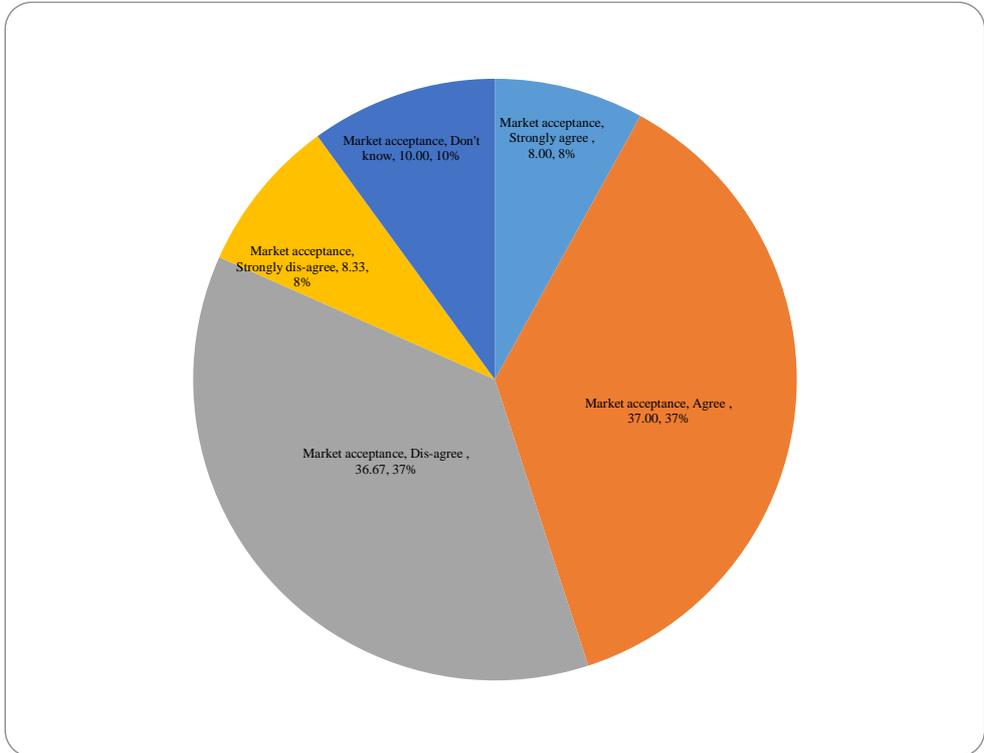
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Source: Pie Diagram for Analysis of Descriptive Variables

Another set of the questions throw light on the job market acceptance of the virtual degree (Figure 3). Nearly 36.67% students disagree that this degree provides them an edge in the job market. The reason may be the process of knowledge distribution that is indirect student teacher interaction in this system than traditional one and therefore this degree is ranked less than traditional degree in job market. On the other hand, 37% students agreed that this degree has an impact on job market. The reason may be that those students that are already in job market use this degree to improve their current positions within the same organization and they need not to search for job. The graph given below clearly explains the analysis of the job market behaviour of the students.

Figure 3: Market Acceptance



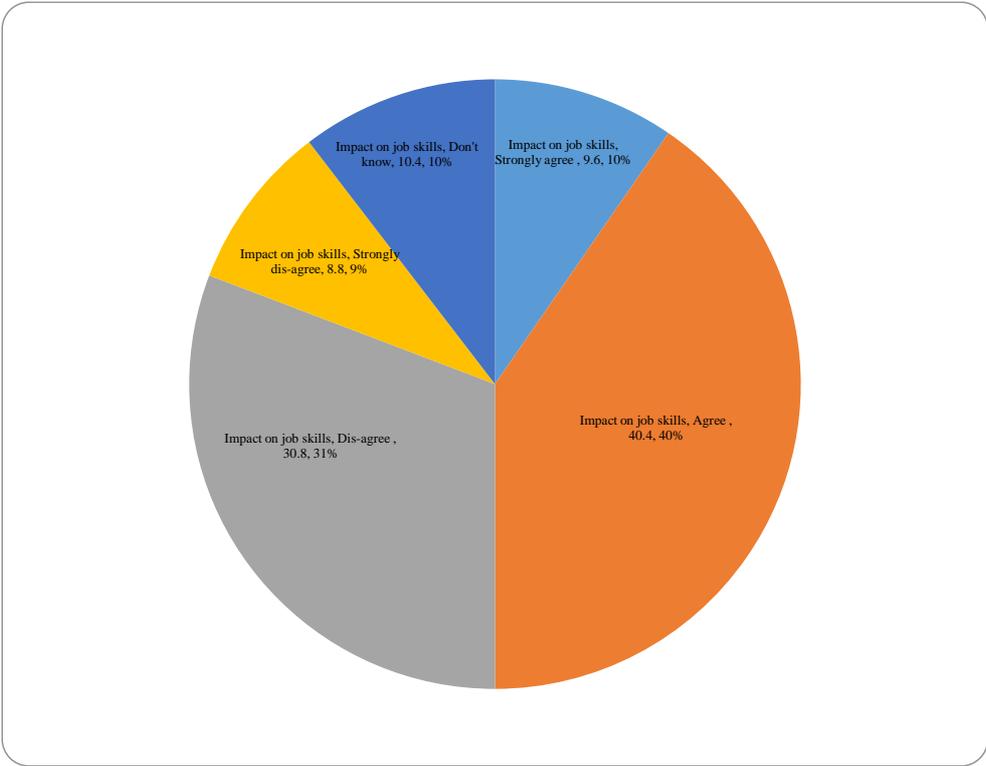
Source: Pie Diagram for Analysis of Descriptive Variables

Consensus about the impact of Virtual learning on job skills (Figure 4) provide us mixed results. 30.8% disagree that distance education has any impact on the job skills on the other hand, 40.4% agree that it has. The reason might be the introduction of new advanced technology and use of new delivery methods help them to use the same skills in their job and get the benefits in turn. But those who disagree, state that due to the communication gaps, they are unable to polish the hidden qualities that is possible if there is a direct communication between student and teacher.

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Figure 4: Impact on Job Skills

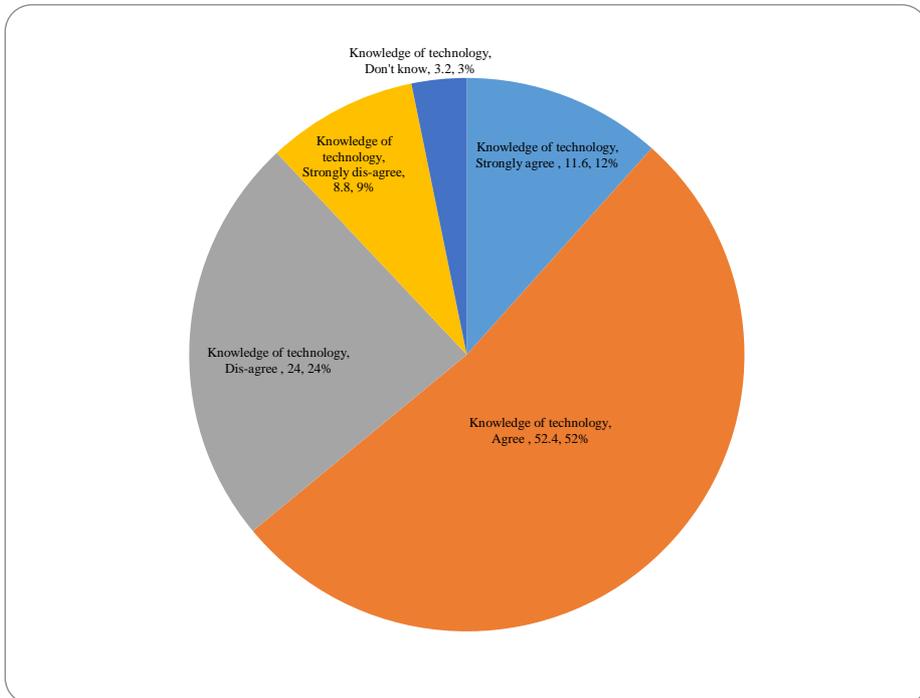


Source: Pie Diagram for Analysis of Descriptive Variables

It was surprised to see the results about the impact of technology on career growth (Figure 5). It is the fact of the day that due to rapid globalization, advanced technology has facilitated the business environment a lot. But 52.4% students do not know how the use of technology can be used to improve their careers. It may be due to the reason that they are far apart from their tutors and by just listening the lectures on compact discs it may be difficult for them to catch the real meaning of all subjects. Also the students living in rural areas are not very much aware of the use of the advanced technology. That is why,

they can not clearly formulate the impact of advanced technology on career development.

Figure 5: Impact of Technology on Learning



Source: Pie Diagram for Analysis of Descriptive Variables

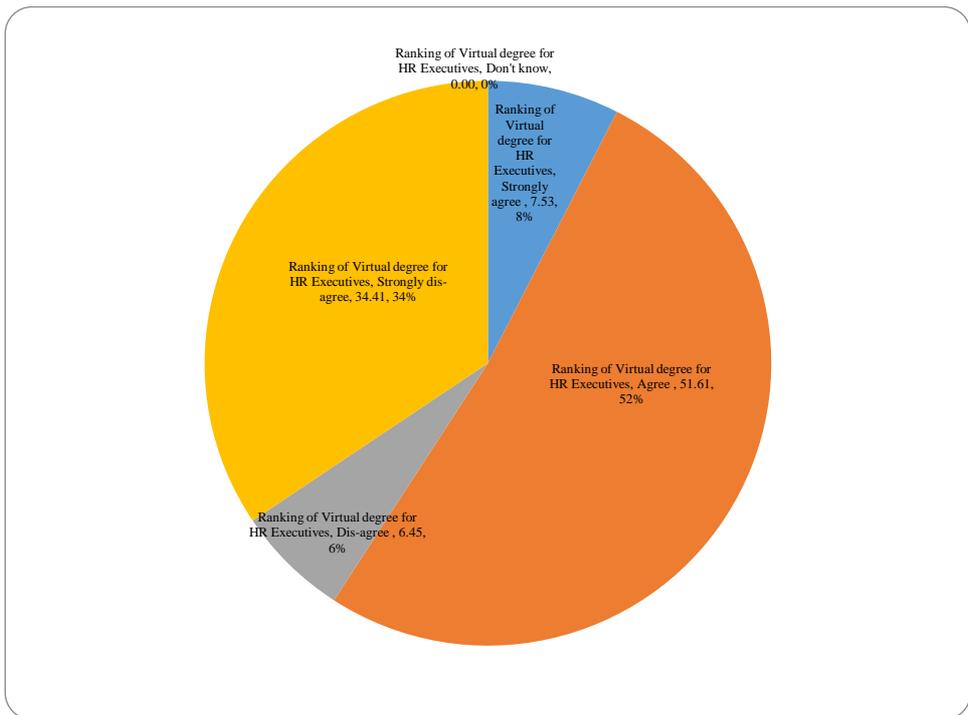
We have made a comparative analysis of the ranking of both degrees for HR executives (Figure 6), almost more than half of the population (51.61%) believes that virtual degree is ranked less than traditional degree in job market by HR executives. 34.41% agree that HR do not rank this degree while awarding jobs. The preference is given to the traditional degree holders. The reason might be that virtual executives has some deficiencies in term of delivery of knowledge, lack of skills

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to be interviewed and also the lack of self-confidence due to the perceived knowledge that he has gained on their own behalf in the absence of a physical tutor.

Figure 6: Ranking of Virtual Degree for HR Executives

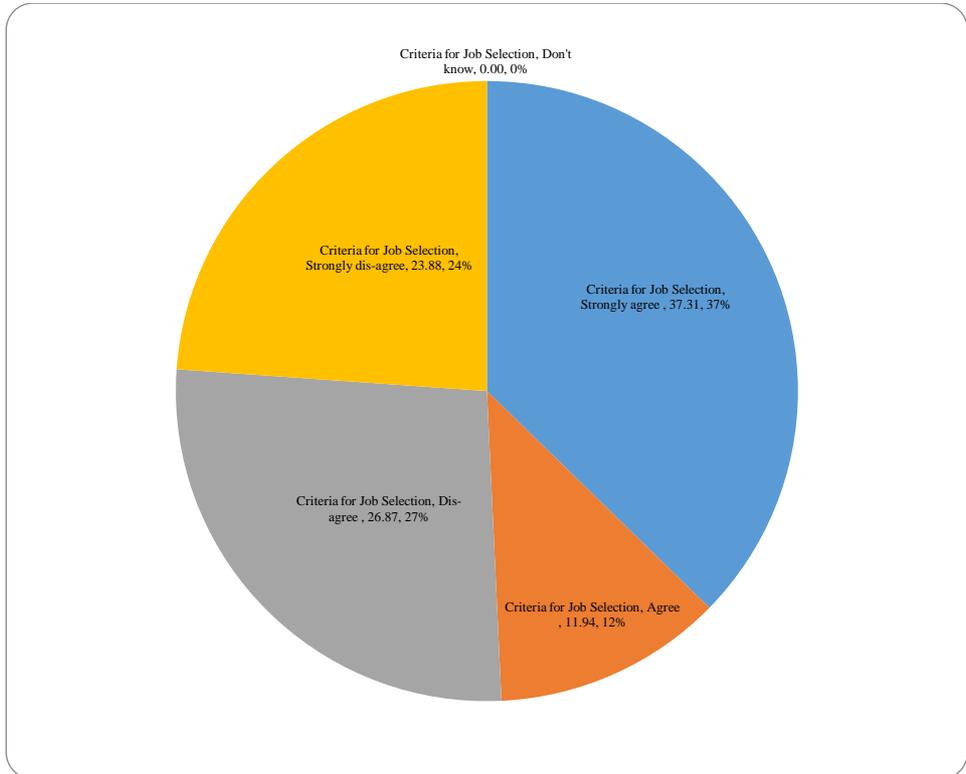


Source: Pie Diagram for Analysis of Descriptive Variables

Almost 37.31% students strongly believe that basic qualification level is the foremost criteria for job selection. It means that if students do not fulfil the minimum requirement of the education for a particular job,

they will be deprived of that job opportunity. In order to avoid this situation, executives get themselves enrolled in distance learning programs, to get education keeping in view the motive of career improvement by just getting a degree to fulfil the minimum criteria of education level for job selection. Figure 7 summarises these results.

Figure 7: Basic Qualification is Criteria for Job Selection



Source: Pie Diagram for Analysis of Descriptive Variables

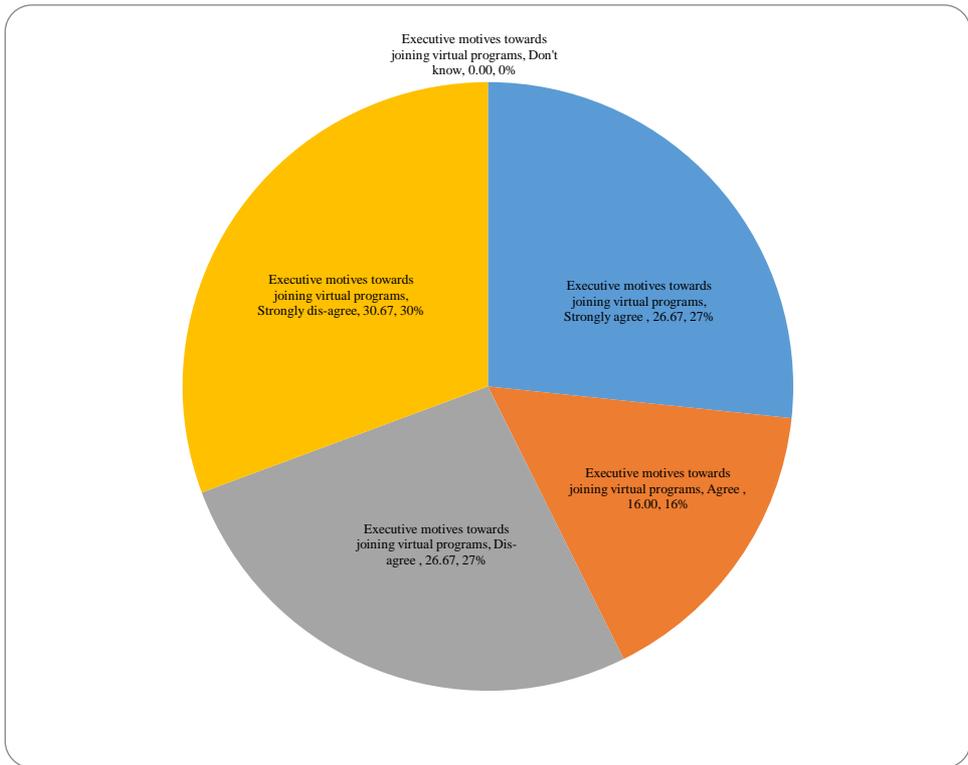
In the end, it is clearly shown from the graph given below (Figure 8) that most of the students (26.67%) agree that their motive is to satisfy their learning aptitude. While 26.67% agree that the motive is to improve their career. This shows the mixed results and may be due to

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the fact that those students who want to increase their earning get themselves enrolled in such programs and those who want to learn without going to institute due to having no time to fulfil the requirement of credit hours or disability or age factor, or low fee get themselves enrolled in such program.

Figure 8: Executive Motives towards joining Virtual Programs



Source: Pie Diagram for Analysis of Descriptive Variables

5. Conclusions

What would be the reason of the students; it is the responsibility of the university administration to make the students aware of the fact that in

this age of competition how much knowledge is important? Despite of focusing on the impact to improve career they should first get the knowledge and then try to use it most efficiently. Also make them realize that either they get the knowledge by formal or informal ways; it is their responsibility to make effective use of the opportunity given to them so that they also become successful in life. This paper has been written on the executive trends towards joining virtual programs. The results are somewhat mixed and noticeable. Most of the students have set their mind about the virtual education as it is a degree that could be obtained without hard work but it may benefit them as for the improvement of their careers and personal benefits. They do not think about the long term benefits of getting education and to face the upcoming competition due to the emerging technologies. They just think to fulfil the current needs in any way therefore they are in need to get advanced degrees in order to boost their careers and they use virtual education for this purpose.

6. Future Prospects

As per our discussion with students it has been observed that virtual students are not very much happy with the mode of the study as in their opinion the lectures are outdated and are not revised according to the changing market conditions. Their question was “how to compete when lectures CDs do not provide us the current information about market?” So, it has been suggested to revise the lecture CDs as necessary.

Again the problem has been seen about the interaction with tutors because there is not any provision for the students to interact with the tutors directly. For the problems they have faced. Since the LMS has been provided to facilitate them but according to the students it does not fulfil the satisfaction level. The university should maintain a proper communication system for students help.

There is a problem regarding the supply of handouts and other study material. It has been observed that students have not direct access to

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the handouts and other material till midterm and some after that. This is the biggest reason of the low %ages of results and students have to face a lot of difficulty in coping with the scheduled lectures for continuation of study. And then they face a lot of difficulty to understand the material for which they lagged behind. The University administration should made easy and timely access of handouts and study material for students help. Also during online exams, many students faced the problem of system. The systems provided to them are outdated and do not work properly. Due to which the given time for the exams is wasted and students are unable to complete the paper. University should made advanced visit to approved campuses and they themselves check the quality and quantity of the systems according to the students' adjustments.

Those students that are studying along with jobs better focused their job and take degrees of distance learning for development of their career. For such students attempts should be made to change their focus by providing them the guarantee that the University will be responsible for the job of those students who will get the scores above certain %ages decided by university administration. This will increase the competition among them and also the focus on study. Such arrangements will in turn increase the %ages of the results up to a standard level. That will attract the students to be enrolled in a bright university for getting better chances of study.

These are the basic problems faced by students and if such type of problems can be resolved, there will be a big change in the mode of the study and students satisfaction level. They will be better able to concentrate on study and interaction of the tutor will able them to cover up the deficiencies. Again the motive of the students will be changed from career development to learning also.

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