ONLINE DEGREES AS CREDENTIALS FOR EMPLOYMENT: HOW DO CANADIAN EMPLOYERS VIEW ONLINE DEGREES?

By

FATIMA BAHIR

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

MASTER OF ARTS

in

LEARNING AND TECHNOLOGY

Dr. Jo Axe, Academic Supervisor
Faculty and Director, School of Education and Technology, Royal Roads University

Dr. Sandra Kirby, External Reader/Examiner
Associate VP of Academic and Dean of Graduate Studies, University of Winnipeg

Dr. Mathew Heinz, Committee Chair
Dean of Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences, Royal Roads University

ROYAL ROADS UNIVERSITY
September 2014

© Fatima Bahir, 2014
Abstract

Canadian post-secondary institutions cumulatively deliver over 300 programs online or at distance as alternatives to on-campus teaching, and student enrollments in online programs are expected to increase (Canadian Virtual University (CVU), 2013). However, little is known about online degrees as credentials for employment. Focusing on bachelor’s degrees awarded by Canadian universities for online and distance education, this mixed methods study investigated the views of a convenient sample of 87 employers using hypothetical hiring and job promotion scenarios. A total of 84 surveys and 4 interviews were conducted with management and human resources personnel at Canadian organizations in the public, private, and social sectors. The findings indicated that 75% of participants considered online degrees equivalent to campus-based face-to-face degrees in the hiring scenario, and over 90% had no preference between campus-based and online degrees in the employment promotion scenario. Four themes emerged related to credibility of online degrees, educational quality of online degrees, affordances and constraints of online education, and gaps in awareness. The findings are relevant to graduates and students of online education as well as educational institutions offering online degrees.

Key words: Online degrees, online degrees and employment, online education and employment, distance education and employment, jobs and online degrees, Canadian online degrees, Canadian employers’ perceptions of online degrees, employment potential, employment, employability
Dedication

Dedicated to my late father, Dr. Abdul Baqi Bahir, who exemplified to never stop learning, and my mother, Humaira Bahir, who instilled in me that nothing is impossible to achieve.
Acknowledgements

This work would have not been possible without the support of a number of encouraging, and knowledgeable people. First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Jo Axe for her guidance and constructive feedback to help me get this study to completion. Special thanks, to Dr. Sandra Kirby and Dr. Mathew Heinz for their reviews of this thesis. As well, I would like to acknowledge the support of Dr. Bill Muirhead, Dr. Deborah Zornes, and Dr. Alice MacGillivray, who assisted me in determining a research focus. Particular appreciations to Piotr (Peter) Biernot for helping me identify an appropriate approach for the survey analysis. Special acknowledgements are to Piers Drew, my manager, who continually encouraged me through the research process, and to my peers, Christine Wrightson, Jan Lundquist, Felipe Villegas, and George Gallant for testing the online survey prior to study launch. Finally, I would like to thank the 87 participants who responded to the survey and interviews, without them this study would have not been available.
Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. I
DEDICATION ............................................................................................................................... II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................................. III
LIST OF TABLES ......................................................................................................................... VI
LIST OF FIGURES ...................................................................................................................... VIII

CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND ............................................................................................. 1
STUDY AREA .............................................................................................................................. 1
PROBLEM STATEMENT .............................................................................................................. 2
PERSONAL INTEREST .................................................................................................................. 4
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY ........................................................................................................... 5
Research Question ...................................................................................................................... 5
Sub-questions: ............................................................................................................................ 5
STUDY PARTICIPANTS ............................................................................................................... 6
HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK: FROM CORRESPONDENCE TO ONLINE .................................. 6
PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE EDUCATION ............................................................................... 9
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY ................................................................................................. 10
DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS ................................................................................................. 11
SUMMARY ................................................................................................................................. 13

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE .................................................... 15
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS ............................................................................................... 15
Power Elite ................................................................................................................................. 16
Social Stratification ..................................................................................................................... 17
Positivist Technological Determinism ...................................................................................... 18
EMPLOYMENT AND EMPLOYABILITY OF UNIVERSITY GRADUATES IN CANADA .......... 19
EMPLOYER PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE DEGREES ................................................................ 25
Canadian Study .......................................................................................................................... 26
American Studies ..................................................................................................................... 27
Relevance of Literature to Canadian Context ............................................................................ 32
EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES ..................................................................................................... 33
No Significant Difference ......................................................................................................... 33
Differences ................................................................................................................................. 33
Knowledge Domains ................................................................................................................. 34
SUMMARY ................................................................................................................................. 37

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY .................................................................................... 38
PURPOSE .................................................................................................................................... 38
APPROACH ................................................................................................................................. 39
STUDY PARTICIPANTS ............................................................................................................... 40
STUDY DESIGN .......................................................................................................................... 41
Interview ..................................................................................................................................... 41
Survey ......................................................................................................................................... 41
Validity and Reliability .............................................................................................................. 43
DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS ....................................................................................................... 44
TESTING ....................................................................................................................................... 46
STUDY OPERATION .................................................................................................................... 46
Interviews .................................................................................................................................... 47
Survey ......................................................................................................................................... 48
DATA ANALYSIS ........................................................................................................................ 49
Interview Analysis .................................................................................................................... 49
## ONLINE DEGREES AS CREDENTIALS FOR EMPLOYMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Analysis</th>
<th>50</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Threats to Validity</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Validity</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misinterpretation of Questions</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Possible Attempts</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-probability Sampling</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Bias</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>55</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant Demographics</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Demographics</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS II - THEMATIC ANALYSIS

| Credibility of Online Degrees                        | 93 |
| Accreditation                                        | 94 |
| Credibility of Institutions                          | 94 |
| Trust in Canadian Education System                   | 96 |
| Educational Quality of Online Degrees                | 97 |
| Institution and Program Reputation                   | 97 |
| Educational Effectiveness and Educational Experience | 100 |
| Affordances and Constraints of Online Education      | 107 |
| Stated Gaps in Awareness                            | 110 |
| Summary                                              | 111 |

### CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

| Power Elite                                          | 113 |
| Social Stratification                                | 114 |
| Positivist Technological Determinism                | 114 |
| Summary                                              | 115 |

### CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

| Implications of the Study                            | 116 |
| Implications for Graduates and Current Participants of Online Degrees | 119 |
| Implications for Prospective Participants of Online Education | 119 |
| Implications for Institutions Offering Online Degrees | 120 |
| Recommendations for Future Studies                   | 120 |
| Conclusion                                           | 121 |

### REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

### APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORMS

| Paper Format Informed Consent for In-person Interviews | 133 |
| Electronic Consent for E-Interviews                   | 135 |

### APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

### APPENDIX C: SURVEY INSTRUMENT

| 145 |
List of Tables

TABLE 3.1 ................................................................................................................................. 49
DATA ANALYSIS FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT X .............................................................. 49
TABLE 4.1 .................................................................................................................................. 56
AGE RANGE AND SEX OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS ......................................................... 56
TABLE 4.2 .................................................................................................................................. 56
HIGHEST EDUCATION OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS ......................................................... 56
TABLE 4.3 .................................................................................................................................. 56
PROVINCE OF WORK AND RESIDENCE OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS ......................... 56
TABLE 4.4 .................................................................................................................................. 57
SECTOR AND CURRENT JOB OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS .............................................. 57
TABLE 4.5 .................................................................................................................................. 57
INDUSTRIES AND ORGANIZATION SIZE OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS ......................... 57
TABLE 4.6 .................................................................................................................................. 58
INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS’ DIRECT EXPERIENCE WITH ONLINE LEARNING ................. 58
TABLE 4.7 .................................................................................................................................. 59
INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS’ INDIRECT EXPOSURE TO ONLINE LEARNING AT POST-SECONDARY OR GRADUATE LEVEL ................................................................. 59
TABLE 4.8 .................................................................................................................................. 60
INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS’ INTEREST IN COMPLETING AN ONLINE DEGREE OR CERTIFICATION .................................................................................................................. 60
TABLE 4.9 .................................................................................................................................. 61
INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS’ DIRECT EXPERIENCE, INDIRECT EXPOSURE, AND INTEREST IN ONLINE EDUCATION .................................................................................. 61
TABLE 4.10 .................................................................................................................................. 62
INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS’ INVOLVEMENT IN HIRING ACTIVITIES OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS .................................................................................................................... 62
TABLE 4.11 .................................................................................................................................. 70
AGE RANGE OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS ................................................................................ 70
TABLE 4.12 .................................................................................................................................. 70
SEX OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS .............................................................................................. 70
TABLE 4.13 .................................................................................................................................. 71
HOME POPULATION OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS ................................................................. 71
TABLE 4.14 .................................................................................................................................. 80
SURVEY PARTICIPANTS’ ORIGINAL AND ADJUSTED RESPONSES IN HIRING SCENARIO ..... 80
TABLE 4.15 .................................................................................................................................. 85
SURVEY PARTICIPANTS’ ORIGINAL AND ADJUSTED RESPONSES IN JOB PROMOTION SCENARIO ................................................................. 85
TABLE 4.16 ......................................................................................................................... 86
SURVEY PARTICIPANTS’ RESPONSE CONSISTENCY RATES BETWEEN HIRING AND EMPLOYMENT PROMOTION SCENARIOS ................................................................. 86
TABLE 4.17 ......................................................................................................................... 89
SURVEY RESPONDENTS’ PARTICIPATION IN E-LEARNING, AND VIRTUAL TRAINING AND WEBINARS FOR WORK AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ........................................... 89
TABLE 4.18 ......................................................................................................................... 90
SURVEY RESPONDENTS’ PARTICIPATION IN CORRESPONDENCE STUDIES, AND ONLINE COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY COURSES AND PROGRAMS ......................................................... 90
List of Figures

FIGURE 4.1.................................................................................................................................71
HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS ............................................71
FIGURE 4.2...................................................................................................................................72
PROVINCE OF WORK OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS.................................................................72
FIGURE 4.3...................................................................................................................................73
SECTOR OF EMPLOYMENT FOR SURVEY PARTICIPANTS.......................................................73
FIGURE 4.4...................................................................................................................................74
ORGANIZATION SIZE FOR SURVEY PARTICIPANTS...............................................................74
FIGURE 4.5...................................................................................................................................75
EMPLOYMENT CATEGORY OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS.........................................................75
FIGURE 4.5...................................................................................................................................76
SURVEY PARTICIPANTS’ PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE AND DISTANCE LEARNING FOR EDUCATION, TRAINING OR CAREER DEVELOPMENT .........................................................76
FIGURE 4.6...................................................................................................................................77
TYPE OF ONLINE OR DISTANCE COURSES OR PROGRAMS TAKEN BY SURVEY PARTICIPANTS ........................................................................................................................................77
FIGURE 4.7...................................................................................................................................78
SURVEY PARTICIPANTS’ INVOLVEMENT IN HIRING OR PROMOTING EMPLOYEES OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS ..............................................................................................................78
FIGURE 4.8...................................................................................................................................79
SURVEY PARTICIPANTS’ PREFERENCES IN HIRING SCENARIO .............................................79
FIGURE 4.10.................................................................................................................................85
FIGURE 4.11.................................................................................................................................88
SURVEY RESPONDENTS’ GENERAL PARTICIPATION RATES IN ONLINE OR DISTANCE LEARNING AND PREFERENCE IN HIRING PER RESPONSE CATEGORY ........................................88
Chapter One: Background

Canadian post-secondary institutions cumulatively deliver over 300 programs online or at distance as alternatives to on-campus teaching, and student enrollments in online programs are expected to increase (CanLearn, 2013; Canadian Virtual University (CVU), 2013). However, academic literature about the return on the investment of students in online education in the Canadian labour market is limited. Through an investigation of Canadian employers’ views on online bachelor’s degrees granted by Canadian universities, in this study I explored employment potentials of online degree graduates. Situating the research question within the environmental and historical context as well as personal interest, I provide a background to the study in this chapter.

Study Area

With the expansion of the Internet and the availability of versatile information and communication tools and technologies, increasingly Canadian educational institutions offer online and distance programs as alternatives to on-campus teaching. According to Government of Canada’s CanLearn (2013), Canadian post-secondary institutions cumulatively deliver more than 300 programs and 2,400 courses over the Internet or at distance, in subjects ranging from anthropology, sociology and accounting to forensic science, computer science and biology (CanLearn, 2013; CVU, 2013). As to graduation numbers, in 2012, three Canadian universities alone graduated over a thousand students with online bachelor’s degrees in disciplines from communications to management, and nursing to information systems (Athabasca University (AU), 2013; Royal Roads University (RRU), 2013; Telé université du Québec (TÉLUQ), 2013). This indicates
availability of a wide range of post-secondary programs and a significant number of graduates of online programs in the country. However, little is known about how online degrees offered by Canadian institutions are perceived in employment situations.

Focusing on bachelor’s degrees awarded by Canadian universities for online and distance education, this study investigated the views of Canadian employers to assess employment acquisition or advancement potentials of online degree graduates. The findings will inform students and graduates of online education and educational service providers as to the perceived value of online degrees by Canadian employers in hiring and employment promotion situations.

**Problem Statement**

Although studies related to employment and employability of post-secondary graduates have been conducted, such as Boudarbat and Connolly’s (2013) analysis of wage gaps of graduates by gender, Finnie’s (2001) study of labour market outcomes by discipline, and Chaze and George’s (2013) study of internationally-educated engineers in Canada, specific literature on the employment, and employability of graduates of online degree programs in Canada is limited. A search for articles in Google Scholar and Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) using various combinations of key terms returned one relevant Canadian study. Fahy, Spencer, and Halinski (2008) of Athabasca University assessed the self-reported impact of graduate program completion by surveying graduates of master of distance education and graduates of graduate diploma in technology, both offered through distance education. Fahy et al.’s (2008) findings, based on 84 completed surveys, indicated that participants’ salaries were positively affected by program completion, particularly for women, and 56% of respondents worked in their
field of study. The focus of the study, however, was on specific graduate level diplomas, and did not include undergraduate online or distance programs.

Though Canadian literature on employment of online degree graduates is limited, numerous American studies have been conducted about acceptability of online degrees in employment situations and employer perceptions of online degrees. Adams and colleagues, who conducted a series of surveys, concluded that American employers preferred to hire candidates with conventional campus-based degrees than those with online degrees (Adams, Lee, & Cortese, 2012; Adams, DeFleur, & Heald, 2007; Adams & DeFleur, 2006). In contrast with the extensive surveys by Adams and colleagues, Seibold (2007) conducted a qualitative study with six employers in various American companies. Seibold’s (2007) findings indicated that employers who had positive personal experiences with online education also presented positive views of online degrees.

Further to the American studies, research has been conducted in Nigeria and Mexico related to employment potentials of online degrees. Udegbe (2012) explored the perceptions of prospective human resources personnel in Nigeria and found that online degrees were less favoured than campus-based degrees by the participants. Padilla Rodriguez and Adams (2011) examined students’ perceptions of online learning in Mexico and discovered that participants regarded traditional degrees as more adequate professional credentials than online equivalents. Even though the findings of these studies are significant, they may not be applicable in the Canadian context due to differences in the educational and economic systems. Canadian studies, therefore, are needed to
understand the situation in Canada and inform Canadian students and educational institutions.

**Personal Interest**

My interest in investigating the employment prospects of online degree graduates began with my involvement in online education. I am a graduate student in an online program at Royal Roads University. Although I did not have any preconceived notions about the online learning experience when I enrolled in the program, I was unaware of the educational environment, the benefits, and the challenges of online education. One of the highlights of my learning experience has been the ability to work with fellow students across the country, and sometimes outside the country. I have also enjoyed the flexibility related to the time and space to pursue a degree. At the same time, balancing work, life, and school has been a constant challenge for me during my studies. The financial costs of a graduate degree have also been significant. I often wondered whether the financial and personal investments in an online degree would translate to improved employment status in the labour market.

In conversations with friends, family, and colleagues, I realized that perceptions of online education included learning in isolation, lack of interaction with other students or faculty, easier admission to programs, and higher possibilities for academic dishonesty than face-to-face education. A number of my friends, family, and colleagues hold managerial positions and I wondered to what extent their views could influence their hiring practices related to online degree graduates, and how other Canadian employers
perceived online degrees. With this preoccupation, my interest grew in pursuing a study about online degrees and employment potentials.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this non-sequential mixed methods study was to explore the attitudes and stated practices of Canadian employers towards hiring and promoting graduates with online bachelor’s degree from accredited Canadian universities. The study included an online survey and interviews. The study addressed the following research question and sub-questions.

**Research Question**

How do Canadian employers view online bachelor’s degrees from accredited Canadian universities as credentials for employment when hiring and promoting employees?

**Sub-questions:**

1. In what ways does the educational delivery modality, primarily online or primarily face-to-face, affect the chances a job seeker has of getting hired or promoted in Canada?

2. How do employers compare degrees completed in a primarily face-to-face environment with degrees completed in a primarily online environment?

3. How do exposure and experience of an employer with online education influence their perceptions of online degrees?
Study Participants

Canadian employers requiring employees with bachelor’s degrees were the population of interest for the study. This included management, and human resources personnel at Canadian public, private, and social/volunteer sectors across the country and across industries. The main criterion for participation was involvement in hiring or promoting employees at a Canadian organization over the past five years.

Historical Framework: From Correspondence to Online

The evolution of distance education in Canada, from correspondence studies to online education, provided a historical framework for this study. Distance education at Canadian post-secondary level dates back to 1889, when correspondence studies were introduced at McGill to create degree opportunities for rural teachers (Haughey, 2012). By 1912, Universities of Alberta and Saskatchewan also offered self-study programs to rural learners (Haughey, 2012). Considered as the first phase of distance education in Canada and continuing until the end of 1960s, this form of education delivery was via mailing print-based educational materials to students with no or little interaction with faculty (Moran, 1993). However basic the educational delivery methods, this phase pioneered expanding access to post-secondary education to rural and isolated populations in the country, and inspired alternative forms of instructional delivery at Canadian institutions.

1970s witnessed the beginning of a foundational era in distance education in Canada introducing two fully distance universities. Athabasca University (AU), in English Canada, and Télé-université, l'université à distance de Québec (TELUQ), in
French Canada, were founded (Haughey, 2012). These institutions widened access to post-secondary education beyond provincial borders (Moran, 1993). With current undergraduate student populations of over 34,000 and 18,000 respectively, AU and TELUQ remain the only two entirely online and distance universities in Canada today (Canadian Virtual University (CVU), 2013). They deliver 100% of their courses and programs online or at distance to close to fifty thousand students cumulatively.

Royal Roads University (RRU), a third player with a smaller student population and a different model, joined the distance and online universities when it got its public university status in 1995. As a primarily online institution with a focus on applied and professional fields, Royal Roads follows a blended or hybrid learning model. Unlike AU and TELUQ, which are 100% online, majority of RRU’s online programs are complemented with on-campus residencies (CVU, 2013; RRU, 2013). This model allows for face-to-face interaction amongst students and with faculty as well as online and distance learning.

Meanwhile, other Canadian universities across the country have continued to establish or expand distance, distributed, or online education divisions or units at their institutions, specializing in alternative educational delivery. The functions of these units vary from institution to institution, from primary responsibility of managing the delivery of online or distance degrees or courses to supporting faculty with technology-assisted teaching methods (CVU, 2013; CanLearn, 2013). Most Canadian universities offer some form of online or distance learning. Some institutions have also formed partnerships with other institutions to deliver online and distance programs.
One of the main alliances institutions have established is the Canadian Virtual University (CVU). In 2000, six Canadian universities joined forces and formed a collaborative association to promote and offer their online and distance courses and programs through a single portal. Presently, CVU consists of eleven member institutions, including Athabasca, Carleton, Laurentian, Manitoba, Memorial, Royal Roads, and l'université à distance de l'UQÀM. Member institutions promote over 2000 courses and 250 online and distance degree programs through the single portal and provide students with a quicker way to search, start, transfer, and complete online or distance programs (CVU, 2013). The collaborative model of CVU represents a creative approach in promoting and delivering online programs.

Beyond institutional models and availability of courses and programs, instructional approaches and learning environments have changed over the decades from correspondence studies to flexible learning environments. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) and research in pedagogy have transformed the way instruction is delivered. Notably, based on the growing acceptability that we learn through dialogue, exchange, and collaboration with others, collaborative and social learning is increasingly integrated in online learning environments (Lee & McLoughlin, 2010; Perry & Edwards, 2010). Geographically dispersed learners can connect and interact with their peers and instructors in real time or within connected virtual spaces to collaborate on assignments, engage in discussions, and receive guidance using Web 2.0 tools (Anderson, 2008). Furthermore, adaptive assessment technologies customize learning content based on a student’s personal learning needs and their interaction with the learning environment (Khan Academy, 2014; Agarwal, 2009). These represent
significant improvements from the traditional self-directed correspondence and tele-courses of the earlier decades.

**Participation in Online Education**

Although reliable and comprehensive national data on enrollments in online and distance learning and demographics of online or distance learners are not available (CVU, 2012; Bates, 2011), existing statistics point to enrollment rates of approximately 10% of post-secondary students in online education. One national Canadian survey reported that 11% of students who responded to the survey took at least one online undergraduate course in 2007 (Canadian University Survey Consortium, 2008, p. 27). A provincial study in Ontario by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (2011) found that online course registrations constituted 11% of all post-secondary course registrations in Ontario public institutions in 2010. Even though these statistics are not comprehensive, they suggest that one in ten students at post-secondary level participates in online education.

As to the demographics of online learners, according to Statistics Canada (2008), twice as many adult Canadians aged 25 to 64 participated in online and distance education compared with those aged 18 to 24 in 2008. About 30% to 35% of participants within each age group of 25 to 34, 35 to 44, and 45 to 64 enrolled in online or distance learning in contrast with 16% of those 18 to 24. Online and distance education, offering flexible schedules with no or minimal on-campus attendance, fits the lifestyles of adults aspiring to advance careers or change employment directions, while attending to professional and demands (Sork, 2010).
Looking forward, CVU (2012), Industry Canada (2011), Carleton University (2012), and Government of Ontario’s Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (2011) predict increases in general online course and program participation in the upcoming years. This suggests that a greater number of graduates with online education will seek entry or advancement in the workforce.

**Significance of the Study**

The intent of this study was to inform graduates, students, and prospective students of online education and institutions offering online degrees related to employers’ perceptions of online degrees. Graduates with online degrees from Canadian institutions will be in a better position to present their educational qualifications to employers. Students, and prospective students of Canadian institutions can be better informed about the perceived value of online degrees in the labour market. Furthermore, educational institutions can use the findings to address employers’ informational needs.

Previous Canadian studies on employer perceptions of online degrees were not accessible. I entered various combinations of key terms, such as online degrees and employers, employment, employer perceptions, employer views, employability or employment potential, and Canada in Google Scholar and ERIC to locate such studies. I identified a study on self-reported impact of graduate program completion by Fahy et al. (2008) of Athabasca University, and a number of American studies on acceptability of online degrees for employment purposes. Fahy et al.’s (2008) study focused on graduate studies and the perspectives of the graduates, which although noteworthy, did not include employers’ perspectives. The findings of the American studies on acceptability of online degrees in employment situations (Adams et al., 2012; Karl & Peluchette, 2013; Seibold,
2007) might not be relevant to the Canadian context given the differences in the education systems between Canada and United States. Canada has a public university system whereas the United States consists of a multi-layered public and private university system with emphasis on institutions’ prestige (Rivera, 2011). Canadian studies, therefore, are needed to understand the situation in Canada.

Potential implications for not engaging in this type of study are the following. First, students, prospective students, and graduates of online education may be uninformed of the perceptions of their degrees and programs in the employment market. Second, educational institutions may continue to offer online degrees without recognizing the potential concerns of employers towards online degrees. Third, prospective students of post-secondary education may not be informed of potential prospects of online degrees for employment purposes.

**Definition of Key Terms**

In this study, the following terms refer to the meaning described below.

**Applicant** refers to an individual, currently employed or unemployed, who has applied for a full-time job that requires a bachelor’s degree.

**Blended learning** means hybrid learning in this study, where both online and campus-based instruction is used.

**Campus-based degrees** are degrees granted by accredited Canadian universities for programs with at least 80% of teaching delivered on campus in face-to-face environment, regardless of the primary business and reputation of the institutions as distance, online, or conventional.
**Conventional Degrees** are used synonymous with campus-based degrees and traditional degrees where at least 80% of teaching is delivered on campus in face-to-face environment, regardless of the primary business and reputation of the institutions as distance, online, or conventional.

**Degrees** are bachelor’s degrees granted by accredited Canadian universities for three or four year post-secondary programs.

**Direct involvement** constitutes reviewing resumes or applications to include or exclude, short-listing for interviews, interviewing, short-listing for examinations or tests, marking examinations or tests, making recommendations for selection, or making final decisions on hiring or promoting employees.

**Distance education** is instruction delivered by an established institution off-campus through correspondence, television, or online programming.

**Distance degrees** are degrees awarded by accredited Canadian institutions for studies completed with at least 100% of instruction delivered off-campus through correspondence, television, or online programming, regardless of the primary business and reputation of the institutions as distance, online, or conventional.

**E-learning** is learning using any form of electronic media and information and communication technologies. E-learning includes but is not limited to the use of the Internet.

**Employer** refers to Canadian employers who met the selection criterion and participated in this study.

**Hybrid learning** refers to educational experience that includes both online and face-to-face on-campus instruction. Online programs with on-campus residencies, or weekly,
biweekly or monthly face-to-face instruction, or which include some online and some
campus-based courses are considered hybrid learning in this study.

**Job seeker** is an individual, currently employed or unemployed, who has applied for a
full-time job that requires a bachelor’s degree.

**Internet-based learning** is synonymous with online learning where educational
materials are provided through the Internet.

**Learning outcomes** are statements of what a student is expected to learn after
completing a process of learning.

**Online learning** is synonymous with Internet-based learning where educational materials
are provided through the Internet.

**Online degrees** are degrees awarded by accredited Canadian universities for studies
completed with 100% of teaching delivered through the Internet regardless of the primary
business and reputation of the institutions as online, distance, or conventional.

**Traditional degrees** are used synonymous with campus-based degrees and conventional
degrees where at least 80% of teaching is delivered on campus in face-to-face
environment, regardless of the primary business and reputation of the institutions as
distance, online, or conventional.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I provided a background to the study and defined the purpose for
the research. I justified the need for this study based on limited literature on employment
and employability of online and distance degree graduates in Canada, and the predictions
for increased enrollments in online and distance education in the future. I defined the
research question to explore how Canadian employers view online bachelor’s degrees
from accredited Canadian universities as credentials for employment when hiring and promoting employees. I also summarized the evolution of distance education from correspondence studies to flexible online environments. Finally, I outlined significance of the study and potential implications for not engaging in this research. In the next chapter, I present a review of relevant literature.
**Chapter Two: Theoretical Frameworks and Review of Selected Literature**

Employment or career advancement is a goal for many who pursue post-secondary education (Galt, 2010). Do employers react differently toward graduates with online degrees than graduates with conventional degrees in employment situations; and if so, in what ways? In this chapter, I present the theoretical frameworks for the study and a review of relevant literature. The chapter is organized under 1) theoretical frameworks, 2) employment and employability of university graduates in Canada, 3) employer perceptions of online degrees, and 4) educational outcomes of online degrees. Throughout the discussion, I highlight areas of agreement and controversy, and identify gaps in the literature.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Three theories influenced this research, power elite (Chomsky, 2012; Mills, 1956; Weber, 1954), social stratification (Rivera, 2011; Weber, 1954; Zornes, 2012), and positivist technological determinism (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Kanuka, 2008). These interrelated theories were selected as the theoretical reference for the study based on the review of literature on online degrees in employment situations. Chapter Six includes a discussion of the findings through these standpoints. Power elite theory was pertinent given the role of employers as people in positions of power, and the position of employees and applicants as those seeking opportunities in the labour market. Social stratification was relevant to this study based on the findings of studies (Adams, 2012; Rivera, 2011; Seibold, 2007) where reputation and prestige of educational institutions, educational credentials, and graduates influenced access to employment and advancement in the labour systems (Adams, 2012; Rivera, 2011). Finally, positivist technological
determinism (Garrison & Anderson, 2003) provided a framework for analyzing the link between online education and employment prospects.

**Power Elite**

It was central to this research to examine the views and stated practices of those with power in the employment market. This approach was inspired by the classical theory of power elite (Mills, 1956; Weber, 1954), and the findings of related studies (Adams, 2012; Richardson et al. 2012; Rivera, 2011). The power elite theory is that certain individuals and groups hold positions of power in the economy and society, outside the elected positions of authority in the government or state (Mills, 1956; Weber, 1954). Mills (1956) referred to these individuals and groups as the *power elite* who exercise significant influence over social and economic systems. The elites tend to share interests, values, and advantaged social and educational backgrounds, and often socialize and connect within the same social networks such as associations, clubs, and boards (Carroll & Sapinski, 2011). Through these networks the elites’ power and influence may extend beyond their organizations to other organizations and businesses (Scott, 2008). Their individual and collective decisions affect the lives and livelihoods of the general population (Chomsky, 2012), and can create access or barriers for others to enter or advance within the economic systems. A study by Rivera (2011) indicated that the organizational leads of law and financial firms limited access to elite jobs to graduates of elite ivy-league institutions, and thereby excluded individuals educated in State universities. Adams (2008; 2012), who referred to the executives, managers, and hiring personnel as the “gatekeepers” controlling access to opportunities in the organizations, found that employers vastly preferred to hire applicants with conventional education and
expressed concerns over the quality of online degrees. Furthermore, Richardson et al. (2012), surveying 105 human resources personnel, learned that the hiring personnel perceived that online degrees required less work, were of lower quality, and could not adequately prepare candidates for leadership positions. The findings of these studies point to barriers for online degree graduates to enter or advance in the employment market. Based on these findings and the perspective of power elite, this paper investigated the views of a convenient sample of Canadian employers about online degrees in employment scenarios.

**Social Stratification**

Social stratification theory was pertinent to this research. This study was influenced by the theory of social stratification. Social stratification is that there are hierarchical structures of class and status that individuals, groups, or organizations in the society belong to (Weber, 1954). The location of individuals, groups, or entities within the hierarchies can determine their social prestige, economic or income opportunities, or access to power (Chomsky, 2012). Studies have been conducted in the United States related to educational credentials and employment that have confirmed this viewpoint. Adams et al. (2008; 2012) found that reputation and prestige mattered to American employers in hiring situations. In their studies, graduates from institutions with higher reputation and status had better prospects at employment than those from less reputable or less recognized institutions (Adams, 2008; Adams et al., 2012). Another study by Rivera (2011) focused on hiring practices for elite jobs, such as lawyers and investment bankers. The findings from the 120 interviews Rivera conducted overwhelmingly indicated that employers across firm types used the prestige of educational credentials as
the most common criterion to solicit and screen resumes (Rivera, 2011). Some employers “formally constrained the bounds of competition for elite jobs to students holding an elite educational credential” (Rivera, 2011, p. 75). The findings of these studies suggest that individuals or groups with higher social status and prestige have better access to employment opportunities than those with lower status and prestige. Furthermore, Zornes (2012) analyzed the role of ranking systems such as McLeans’ related to stratification of Canadian educational system, where institutions with higher ranking and by association their graduates are at advantaged positions. She also argued that with growing corporatization and competition for resources amongst universities, the potential of differentiation between regions, small and large universities, and research intensive and teaching institutions would increase (Zornes, 2012). These studies reviewed stratification or potentials of stratification in the education system, which paved the way for this study to investigate perceptions of stratification of Canadian institutions by Canadian employers.

**Positivist Technological Determinism**

Where power elite and social stratification offered an analytical lens through which to view the role of employers in providing access to opportunities, positivist technological determinism (Garrison & Anderson, 2003) created a framework for analyzing the link between online education and employment prospects. Positivist technological determinism is the theory that technology plays an enabling role in education and facilitates access to learning opportunities and, subsequently, advancement within the society (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Kanuka, 2008). However, a series of studies by Adams, Lee, and Cortese (2012), Adams (2008), Adams, DeFleur, and Heald
Using qualitative and quantitative data, consistently found that applicants with online undergraduate or graduate degrees had a significantly smaller chance of getting employment in the United States than those who acquired their credentials through campus-based education. Furthermore, Seibold (2007), conducting qualitative interviews with six American employers in various industries, telecommunications, data systems, insurance, finance and rental businesses, noted that four of the six study participants believed that online education was inferior to traditional education. Some employers in the study also believed that verification of online degrees and institutions required additional investigative work on the part of the employers and therefore could present an obstacle in hiring (Seibold, 2007).

Although, the findings of Adams et al. (2012), Adams (2008), and Adams et al. (2007) contradict positivist technological determinism related to access to employment and advancement, some of predictions for the future of online education and employment are positive. Linardopoulos (2010) reported anecdotal evidence that perceptions of online degrees will improve. Similarly, Calderon and Sorenson (2014) stated that trust of the public in online higher education has increased as compared with previous years. Using this background, I investigated the link between technology and employment potential by studying the perceptions of employers of online degrees in hiring and job promotion situations.

**Employment and Employability of University Graduates in Canada**

According to Statistics Canada’s National Household Survey (2011), employment rates for bachelor’s degree holders aged 20 to 24 and 25 to 44, respectively in their age
groups, were 67% and 86%; about 3% to 10% higher than their counterparts who had a high school diploma (Statistics Canada, 2011). In terms of income, in 2009, individuals with a bachelor’s degree on average earned about $10,000 more than those with a high school diploma (Statistics Canada, 2009). The nature of employment and employability of university graduates, however, is complex. A number of studies have been conducted that indicating gender wage gap amongst graduates (Boudarbat & Connolly, 2013), underemployment for university graduates (Uppal & LaRochelle- Côté, 2014), higher employability in applied and professional fields (Adamuti-Trache, Hawkey, Schuetze, & Glickman, 2006; Ferguson, 2008), and challenges faced by foreign-educated graduates in the Canadian labour market (Chaze & George, 2013; Magnus, 2008). The following is a summary of key studies.

Boudarbat and Connolly (2013) examined the trends in the gender wage gap among post-secondary graduates between 1988 and 2007, using the data from the National Graduates Survey for five cohorts of 1986, 1990, 1995, 2000, and 2005 who graduated from Canadian public post-secondary institutions, including colleges and Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel (CEGEP), and were employed full-time (Boudarbat & Connolly, 2013). Large samples for each cohort were used, with 15,000 graduates per cohort in the smallest; and the graduates were surveyed two years after graduation and in some cases also five years after graduation for a follow-up (Boudarbat & Connolly, 2013). Wage gap was computed as the value for men minus that for women (Boudarbat & Connolly, 2013). The study concluded that female graduates earned on average 6-14% less than male graduates during the period of two to five years after graduation (Boudarbat & Connolly, 2013). Although women’s wages had improved in
the lower half of the distribution of the wage range over the years with fewer women employed in low paid jobs, the wage gap had increased in the upper half of the scale as more men and fewer women were earning the top dollars (Boudarbat & Connolly, 2013). The findings also indicated that female university graduates experienced higher wage gap than female college and CEGEP graduates, whose earnings had relatively stayed stable over time (Boudarbat & Connolly, 2013). The findings of this study suggest that a university education does not necessarily translate into higher earnings for women.

Another noteworthy study is a recent research by Uppal and LaRochelle-Côté (2014) of Statistics Canada related to over-qualification of university graduates. Using the 2011 National Household Survey and the 1991 and 2006 censuses, Uppal and LaRochelle-Côté (2014) compared the employment of men and women with a university degree aged 25 to 34 between 1991 and 2011. They concluded that many individuals with a university degree worked in jobs for which they were over-qualified and which required college or high school level education; and the over-qualification rates had barely changed between 1991 and 2011 (Uppal & LaRochelle-Côté, 2014). About 18% of men and women worked in occupations usually requiring a high school education or less, and about 40% worked in occupations usually requiring a college-level education or less (Uppal & LaRochelle-Côté, 2014). Based on these findings the majority of individuals with a university degree, about 60%, were over-qualified (Uppal & LaRochelle-Côté, 2014) and not utilizing the skills and knowledge they gained through university degrees.

Furthermore, over-qualification rates were higher for graduates of certain disciplines over others (Uppal & LaRochelle-Côté, 2014). About one third of the working individuals aged 25 to 34 with a university degree in humanities, disciplines such as
philosophy, history, and fine arts, were employed in occupations requiring a high school diploma or less (Uppal & LaRochelle- Côté, 2014). In contrast, those with degrees in education, architecture, engineering, and health related fields had low rates of less than 15% (Uppal & LaRochelle-Côté, 2014). This finding might not be surprising given that disciplines such as history and philosophy are not occupationally specific; and applied professional positions such as engineers and teachers require individuals with educational background in those fields.

Furthermore, studies suggest that graduates of applied and professional programs are likely to experience rapid integration in the labour market, accomplish focused careers, and acquire employment relevant to their field of study as compared with liberal arts and science programs (Adamuti-Trache, Hawkey, Schuetze, & Glickman, 2006; Ferguson, 2008). Adamuti-Trache et al. (2006) conducted a longitudinal study of the labour market outcomes of graduates from liberal arts and applied education programs by examining the 1996 cohort of baccalaureate graduates of three major public universities in British Columbia one year and five years after graduation. Findings from a total of 4,065 respondents who participated in both surveys revealed that graduates from applied programs, such as education, law, engineering, business and health, experienced rapid integration into the labour market as compared to graduates from liberal arts and science programs (Adamuti-Trache, et al., 2006). The findings also indicated that graduates of the liberal arts and science established broader career goals and changed career directions, whereas graduates of applied programs accomplished more focused careers (Adamuti-Trache, et al., 2006). The findings of Adamuti-Trache, et al., 2006 are consistent with the study results of Boudarbat and Chernoff (2009), who examined education-job match for
Canadian university graduates, using the data from the Follow-up of Graduates Survey Class of 2000. The findings indicated that one graduate out of three, 35%, was in a job that was not closely related to his or her education; however, the majority of graduates from field-specific programs such as health sciences and education were employed in their fields (Boudarbat & Chernoff, 2009).

Similarly, a study of nursing graduates (Ferguson, 2008) indicated high levels of employment and employment potential in the nursing field. Ferguson (2008) conducted a survey of three graduating classes of a joint nursing program of University of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan Institutes of Science and Technology, and First Nations University of Canada. She surveyed the graduates of 2002 class five years after graduation, graduates of 2005 two years after graduation, and graduates of 2007 at graduation (Ferguson, 2008). Her findings indicated that 95% of the 139 graduates of Class of 2002 who responded to the survey were employed five years after graduation, some in management positions in health care, and 100% of the 153 graduates of Class of 2005 who responded to the survey were employed as nurses immediately after graduation and continued to be employed (Ferguson, 2008). Finally, of the 196 graduates of Class of 2007 who completed the exit survey at graduation, 85% had confirmed positions before getting their degree and the remainder expected job offers soon after graduation (Ferguson, 2008). These findings point to high employment rates and potential for nursing graduates. Not only job offers were made to graduates prior to graduation, but also graduates maintained employment in their field years after graduation.

Further to studies about the employment of university graduates from Canadian institutions, research has been conducted about employment and employment prospects
of foreign-educated individuals in Canada (Creese & Wiebe, 2012; Magnus, 2008; Uppal & LaRochelle-Côté, 2014). A Statistics Canada study, using the 2011 National Household Survey, found that foreign-educated graduates were more likely than their Canadian-educated counterparts to be over-qualified for jobs they held (Uppal & LaRochelle-Côté, 2014). Among university-educated immigrants aged 25 to 34 who did not graduate in Canada or the United States, 43% of women and 35% of men worked in occupations requiring a high school education or less in 2011 compared with 15% and 20% of Canadian-born or immigrants who graduated in Canada or the United States (Uppal & LaRochelle-Côté, 2014). Specific studies by Creese and Wiebe (2012) and Magnus (2008) also indicated underemployment for foreign-educated individuals. Through interviews with university educated men and women who migrated from Sub-Saharan countries to Canada, Creese and Wiebe (2012) learned that about 75% of the 61 participants experienced downward occupational mobility, and the majority were employed in “survival employment” of low-skilled and low-wage jobs. The findings also indicated that women particularly faced difficulties finding “survival employment”; however, those women who invested in additional post-secondary education in Canada had better chances at employment (Creese & Wiebe, 2012). Magnus’ (2008) study also found downward occupational mobility for internationally educated physicians who took up jobs as physician assistants in Ontario. Magnus’ (2008) evaluation of a series of Ontario pilot projects related to the use of physician assistants in hospital and other health care settings revealed that about 66% of the 59 people hired as physician assistants in four Ontario projects were international medical graduates. Despite passing the Medical Council of Canada exams with excellent grades, foreign-trained physicians accepted
physician assistant positions having been unable to get residencies or assessments to practice as doctors (Magnus, 2008). These studies suggest that international credentials are not adequately recognized in Canada, which can result in underemployment or unemployment of the foreign-educated immigrants.

Overall, the review of studies on the employment and employability of university graduates in Canada provide a context for the current study, examining the employment prospects of online degree graduates. Although studies suggest that the employment rates and integration in the labour market have been positive for graduates of applied and professional studies (Adamuti-Trache, et al., 2006; Ferguson, 2008; Uppal & LaRochelle-Côté, 2014), they also suggest that the graduates of liberal arts and science, and humanities are more likely to be employed in jobs that do not require university education or which may not relate to their field of study (Adamuti-Trache, et al., 2006; Uppal & LaRochelle-Côté, 2014). Furthermore, female university graduates continue to experience wage gaps in the higher wage range (Boudarbat & Connolly, 2013); and foreign-educated individuals experience underemployment or unemployment in the Canadian labour economy (Uppal & LaRochelle-Côté, 2014).

**Employer Perceptions of Online Degrees**

I attempted to locate studies on employer perceptions of online and distance degrees in Canada by searching peer-reviewed journals, Statistics Canada publications, and Google Scholar. Although, I was unable to locate Canadian studies on employer perceptions of online or distance degrees, I identified a study by Fahy, Spencer, and Halinski (2008) who examined self-reported impact of graduate program completion though distance education. I then expanded the search to include North America. I found
a series of studies by Adams with various colleagues (Adams, et al., 2012; Adams, 2008; Adams, et al., 2007; Adams & Defleur, 2005; Adams & Defleur, 2006) that were relevant to this study. In addition, Seibold’s (2007) qualitative study of employers’ perceptions, Karl and Peluchette’s (2013) study of online doctoral degrees for tenure-track positions, Bailey and Flegle (2012) study of MBA’s, and Richardson, McLeod, and Dikkers’ (2011) investigation of the views of human resources directors for K-12 teaching jobs were relevant to this study. The following is a summary of key findings from these studies.

**Canadian Study**

Fahy, Spencer, and Halinski (2008) of Athabasca University studied the self-reported impact of graduate program completion for two programs offered through distance education at Athabasca University. They surveyed the graduates of master of distance education degree, and graduate diploma in technology as to how program completion had affected their careers (Fahy, Spencer, & Halinski, 2008). The findings, based on 84 completed surveys by graduates, 56% of whom employed in distance education careers, indicated that participants’ salaries were positively affected, particularly for women, and personal confidence, and perceptions of promotion potential were positively influenced by program completion (Fahy, Spencer, & Halinski, 2008). This study, however, focused on specific graduate level diplomas, and did not include undergraduate online or distance programs. Furthermore, positive employment outcomes seem likely for graduates who work in distance education and technology fields and who also obtained their education through distance education and the use of technology.
American Studies

Researchers in the United States have studied applicants’ potential for getting hired in a number of sectors based on the modality of their degrees. Results of these studies indicated a much greater likelihood for an applicant with an online or partially online degree to be viewed less qualified for employment than those with traditional classroom degrees. However, some of the methodologies used in these studies were forced options between two choices and did not include a neutral choice.

Adams et al. (2007) surveyed a random sample of 159 healthcare administrators in 38 American cities who had advertisements in “Help Wanted” sections of the newspapers. They presented participants with a hypothetical scenario to choose between an applicant with a fully online degree and an applicant with a traditional degree. They did not present participants with a neutral option (Adams et al., 2007). About 95% selected the applicant with a traditional degree (Adams et al., 2007). Participants were then asked to choose between an applicant with a partially online degree and one with traditional campus-based education; again, they did not provide a neutral option. In this instance, 71% selected the applicant with campus-based education, and the remaining 29% selected partially online degrees. The Adams et al. (2007) study found that although the healthcare administrators in the study favoured traditional degrees, some also recognized partially online degrees as acceptable credentials for employment. In a similar study in 2006 using hypothetical scenarios with two choices, Adams and DeFleur surveyed hiring executives in eight metropolitan areas in United States and discovered overwhelming support for campus-based degrees as compared with online or hybrid degrees. Using the same methodology, in a national survey of 683 high school principals,
Adams, et al. (2012) found that employers vastly preferred to hire applicants with a traditional campus-based degree over applicants with online or partially online degrees for high school teaching jobs. However, the results of these studies could have been different if a neutral option was available to participants.

Furthermore, Richardson, et al. (2011) investigated the perceptions of human resource directors in the United States of online credentials earned by K-12 school principals and principal candidates. By analyzing 105 surveys from school districts across the United States, Richardson et al. (2011) determined that the majority of participants believed that online degrees required less work, were of lower quality, and could not adequately prepare candidates for leadership positions. They also found that the directors in rural districts had a more negative perception of online learning, in comparison to their counterparts in suburban or urban districts (Richardson et al., 2011). Furthermore, Karl and Peluchette (2013) studied the perceptions of hiring faculty members in management departments in accredited business schools related to candidates with online doctorates for a tenure-track assistant professor position. About 90% of respondents rated candidates with traditional doctorates more highly than those with online doctorates, despite applicants’ comparable research records and teaching experience.

A study by Guendoo (2008), however, found contrasting views by hiring personnel in community colleges. Contrary to Adams and Defleur’s (2005) and Karl and Peluchette (2013) studies that had found that academic hiring committees at universities, colleges, and business schools overwhelmingly favoured traditional degrees, Guendoo (2008) found administrators in community colleges friendlier toward online or hybrid doctorate degrees than their counterparts in other higher education institutions. Although
administrators in the community colleges expressed some concern about online doctorate degrees, a majority of them (89.2%) indicated that they did not view online doctoral credentials as unfavorable to the suitability of a faculty candidate. The majority of these administers had taught online courses, were teaching online courses, and were familiar with online education (Guendoo, 2008). This may indicate that experience and exposure with online education might have influenced participants’ views on online credentials.

In addition, two other studies suggest some level of support for online degrees by American employers. Bailey and Flegle (2012) asked 20 hiring managers about their perception of the value for an MBA earned online versus one earned in the traditional classroom setting. About 50% considered online and traditional MBAs as having equal value. Furthermore, a recent survey of American business leaders indicated some support for online degrees (Gallop & Lamina, 2013). Business leaders were asked about the likelihood that employers in their field would hire a candidate with a degree from an online institution over a candidate with the same degree from a traditional institution. Approximately 54% believed that employers in their field were at least somewhat likely to do so (Gallop & Lamina, 2013). However, when asked about hiring candidates with online degrees for their own business, the percentage dropped slightly to 47%. About 14% stated that they were very likely and 33% stated they were somewhat likely to hire an applicant with an online degree for their own business (Gallop & Lamina, 2013). These studies suggest support for online degrees by some American employers.

Overall, with the exception of three studies (Bailey & Flegle, 2012; Gallop & Lamina, 2013; Guendoo, 2008), the findings of American studies indicate that American employers in a number of sectors preferred to hire candidates with traditional campus-
based degrees (Adams & DeFleur, 2006; Adams, 2008; Adams, et al., 2012; Karl & Peluchette, 2013; Richardson et al., 2011; Seibold, 2007). Hybrid degrees were ranked slightly higher than fully online degrees; however, they were not considered equivalent to traditional credentials in hiring scenarios (Adams & DeFleur, 2006; Adams, 2008; Adams, et al., 2012).

**Criticisms of online degrees.** Employers have criticized online or distance degrees as inadequate credentials based on a number of factors. Four main issues were identified in the literature, perceived lack of interactivity, perceived lack of academic rigour, concerns over credibility of online universities, and perceived lack of student commitment (Adams, et al., 2012; Karl & Peluchette, 2013). First, in a number of studies, hiring personnel stated that they believed online degrees lack social interaction and contact with other students, faculty, and mentors (Adams, et al., 2012; Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009, Karl & Peluchette, 2013; Seibold, 2007). These beliefs may be based on perceptions that communication tools and technologies are not utilized in online education. Second, studies by Adams et al. (2012), Columbaro and Monaghan (2009), and Karl and Peluchette (2013) indicated that employers associated a lack of academic rigor, poor quality of instruction, risk for cheating, and a lack of mentored learning experiences with faculty and research staff with online education. These opinions may be based on perceptions that online programs are not overseen for academic standards and educational quality. Third, employers questioned the reputation and credibility of online institutions, including concerns related to diploma mills generating fraudulent degrees (Adams, 2008; Ezell & Bear, 2005; Karl & Peluchette, 2013). Fourth, some employers perceived that students choosing to pursue a degree online demonstrated a lack of
commitment by not attending a campus (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009). These four issues were identified as the main criticisms of online degrees through the critical review of literature.

**Support for online degrees.** Although studies have gathered the criticisms of a number of employers about online degrees, they have also identified factors for support. In studies conducted by Columbaro and Monaghan (2009) and Seibold (2007), support factors for online degrees related to the reputation or recognition of the institution, accreditation by recognized authorities, and perceptions of responsibility and discipline in the graduates. When the institution offering the online degree had a good reputation or recognition, employers would consider the graduates for jobs (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009; Seibold, 2007). Additionally, when the institution or the program was accredited, employers would consider the graduates (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009; Seibold, 2007). For instance, if the school was accredited for its Master of Business Administration (MBA) by the authorized accreditation body, the graduate applying for a job was evaluated as possessing qualified credentials (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009). Finally, some employers perceived that online students were more responsible, self-directed and disciplined, all of which are personal attributes that employers appreciate in employees (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009). These three factors were the key factors identified in support of online degrees in the American studies.

**Prospects.** Some literature suggests that employer support of online degrees is likely to increase in the future. Linardopoulos (2010) argued that as more programs and courses are offered online, and more graduates with online degrees advance within organizations, perceptions of online degrees as a less credible employment credential are
likely to change. Additionally, in a 2012 study, Linardopoulos (2012) found that employers are increasingly providing tuition reimbursement to their employees to complete online coursework, which may be an indicator of perceived utility of online learning by employers. Furthermore, Richardson et al., 2011, comparing recent literature with previous studies, concluded that employers’ perceptions of online degrees have slightly improved. Two recent surveys by Gallop and Lumina (2013) found that about 47% of American business leaders were at least somewhat likely to hire an applicant with an online degree for their business, and Americans’ perceptions of online degrees have improved by 7% from 30% in 2011 to 37% in 2013. These findings point to better prospects for graduates with online degrees in the future.

**Relevance of Literature to Canadian Context**

Although the findings of the American studies provide insights into employers’ perceptions of online degrees, they may not be applicable in the Canadian context. There are significant differences between the post-secondary education systems in the United States and Canada (ACCU, 2013; CanLearn, 2013; United States Department of Education (USDE), 2013). Canada has a primarily public university system (ACCU, 2013; CanLearn, 2013); in contrast, the United States consists of a multilayered public, private, and for-profit university system (USDE, 2013). Additionally, there is a great emphasis on institutions’ reputation, ratings, and prestige in the United States (Rivera, 2011). Therefore, this study focused on the perspectives of Canadian employers, and examined the Canadian context to assess the perceived utility of online degrees.
Educational Outcomes

The majority of studies comparing students’ achievement in online and face-to-face environments have found no significant differences in student learning outcomes (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010; Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw, & Liu, 2006). However, some have found relative differences in student performance based on the mode of instructional delivery (Bryan, Campbell, & Kerr, 2003; Schmidt, 2012; Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart, & Wisher, 2006; Whitewater, Anstine, & Skidmore, 2005). The following is a summary of key findings.

No Significant Difference

Two meta-analyses, Means et al. (2010) and Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006), on the subject of learning outcomes based on delivery modes have reached similar conclusions; that there were no significant differences in student achievement. Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) concluded that both methods of delivery, conventional and online, were adequate. They further noted that in some studies students in the online classes performed better than students in the traditional classes and vice versa (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Means et al. (2010) stated that in recent applications online learning has been modestly more effective than the traditional face-to-face instruction. These meta-analyses represent an important survey of literature and point to no significant differences in student achievement based on the mode of educational delivery.

Differences

Some studies have also found differences in the achievement of learning outcomes between online and campus-based learning. Controlling for factors such as effort and time spent to study for a course in a small-sample study of MBA students at
University of Wisconsin, Whitewater, Anstine, and Skidmore (2005) found the online environment inferior to the traditional format for learning statistics. Schmidt (2012) conducted a quasi-experimental study for two accounting courses each delivered in two modes. There were 31 students in the face-to-face control group and 25 in the online experimental group in ACCT 211, and 22 students in the face-to-face control group and 12 in the experimental group in ACCT 331. Schmidt (2012) found that although there were no significant differences in the educational outcomes of the same accounting courses (ACCT 211 and ACCT 311) delivered in two modes, the students in the face-to-face environment achieved some learning objectives better than students in the online environment did. In contrast, a study by Bryan, Campbell, and Kerr (2003) found that the online modality provided better academic outcomes than traditional learning.

**Knowledge Domains**

When comparing learning outcomes in different knowledge domains between online and face-to-face environments, some have found higher levels of student achievement of certain domains in one modality than the other (Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart, & Wisher, 2006); others (Dell, Low, & Wilker, 2010; Heale, Gorham, & Fournier, 2010; Yoshimura, 2010) have found no significant differences. Yoshimura’s (2010) study compared final grades of students taking specific courses in a wide range of academic disciplines delivered in one of three methods: face-to-face in class, via satellite broadcasting at remote sites, and via live video-streaming at home or at work. The disciplines included engineering, computer engineering, mathematics, education, economics, communications, English, geography, management, marketing, psychology, and nursing with the same instructors teaching the same courses in all three modes.
Yoshimura (2010) concluded that there was no significant difference on student performance in the final course grades regardless of the subject matter (Yoshimura, 2010).

Similarly, individual studies in subject areas from information technology to nursing, psychology to education, and accounting to engineering have found no significant differences in learning outcomes based on the delivery mode (Dell, Low, & Wilker, 2010; Heale, Gorham, & Fournier, 2010; Lam, 2009). Lam (2009) compared an elective programming course’s delivery for undergraduate students in a Management Information Systems program at her institution using the final exam scores from 364 students from six web-based and three traditional classroom courses in two academic years. There were 221 students who took the course through web-based instruction, and 143 who took the course in the traditional classroom. Lam (2009) concluded that there was no difference in student performance in learning technical programming. In addition, when Heale, Gorham, and Fournier (2010) compared the grades for online versus onsite nursing students in one course delivered across nine sites, with some sites offering traditional face-to-face sessions and others providing tutorials online, they discovered that there were no differences in grades between the online and onsite students. Further, Dell, Low, and Wilker (2010) analyzed student achievement using student assignments for two sections of a graduate course in human development and learning in two delivery modes online and face-to-face, as well as three sections of an undergraduate educational psychology course, two of which were taught face-to-face and one taught online. Results indicated no significant differences between the work submitted by students from the online sections and from the face-to-face students (Dell et al., 2010). Furthermore, Beck
Beck (2010) examined multiple sections of an undergraduate criminal justice course in which half of the sections were taught asynchronously online and half were taught in the traditional classroom. Beck (2010) found that method of delivery did not influence student learning.

However, a meta-analysis by Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart, and Wisher (2006) noted relative differences in learning outcomes between classroom instruction and online learning, depending on the knowledge domains. Sitzmann et al. (2006) examined 96 studies that included 19,331 students in 168 courses. In 67% of the research reports, the students were undergraduates, in 18% of the studies participants were graduate students, and in 15% of the investigations participants were employees. This meta-analysis found that online instruction was 6% more effective than classroom instruction for teaching declarative or factual knowledge, and both delivery modes were equally effective for teaching procedural knowledge. They further noted that online learning was 19% more effective than classroom instruction for teaching declarative knowledge when students were provided with more control and time and when students practiced the learning materials and received feedback on their learning (Sitzmann et al., 2006).

**Teaching science.** Teaching natural sciences includes laboratory and practical work beyond factual content. According to Hallyburton and Lunsford (2013) factual content in science courses can be easily transferred to an online format; however, the laboratory and fieldwork components do not lend themselves to an online model. Hallyburton and Lunsford (2013) suggested a hybrid approach where students complete lab requirements at campus facilities and learn factual content online.

The review of literature revealed two main points. First, that although some studies
have found differences in achieving learning outcomes between online and traditional classroom environments, a large body of literature suggests no significant differences in student achievements in the two environments. Second, natural science courses requiring laboratory components do not lend themselves to a 100% online delivery; however, they could be delivered using a hybrid approach. This review of literature provided a basis for my research to investigate the perceptions of Canadian employers of online degrees in light of the findings related to student achievements in online versus campus-based environments.

Summary

Based on the power elite, social stratification, and positivist technological determinism theories, studies revealed a stratified education system: where some institutions and graduates benefit from higher prestige and others receive less recognition. Also, employers generally perceive online and distance education inferior to conventional education, although some studies also point to some level of support for online degrees. In addition, the majority of studies comparing educational outcomes noted no significant differences in student achievements depending on the mode of instruction. These findings pave the way for a Canadian study focusing on the employment and employability of online and distance degree holders in Canada. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology for the study.
Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter includes details of the methodology under the following sections: 1) purpose, 2) approach 3) study participants, 4) study design 5) design considerations, 6) instrument testing, 7) study operation, 8) data analysis, 9) threats to validity, 10) limitations and delimitations, 11) ethical considerations, and 12) summary. I employed a mixed methods methodology, consisting of interviews and survey, to address the research question: How do Canadian employers view online bachelor’s degrees from accredited Canadian universities as credentials for employment when hiring and promoting employees? Using convenient sampling, I recruited 87 participants who completed the interview, the online survey, or both.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes and stated practices of Canadian employers towards hiring and promoting graduates with online bachelor’s degrees from accredited Canadian institutions. The research question, guiding the design of the study, was:

How do Canadian employers view online bachelor’s degrees from accredited Canadian universities as credentials for employment when hiring and promoting employees?

The findings of this study will inform graduates, students, and prospective students of online education and the institutions offering online degrees.
Approach

To explore the research question, I selected mixed methods methodology. Mixed methods is an approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009) to respond to research questions that can benefit from both generality, and particularity, and is considered effective in some forms of social research (Green, 2007). Because the research question is related to labour economics, a discipline in social science, and I intended to efficiently investigate both the generality and particularity of views of employers on online degrees, I chose mixed methods methodology. I used qualitative semi-structured interviews to gain insights into the particularity of views of a small number of employers, and employed an online survey to gather general reactions of a larger number of employers across the country towards online degrees in employment situations. The mixed methods approach, therefore, provided a balance between quantification and qualitative investigation.

Furthermore, I used mere exposure theory and reflexivity as research analysis and evaluation frameworks for the study. According to mere exposure, also called the familiarity effect (Kim & Davis, 2011), an individual’s repeated exposure to a phenomenon can create a sense of acceptance of that phenomenon within their mind (Seibold, 2007). I used this theory as an analytical lens to identify any themes related to the perceptions of employers and their level of exposure to online learning. Whereas mere exposure provided a method to analyze data based on the social experiences of the participants, reflexivity allowed me to examine my personal bias as a social being (Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2006). Reflexivity (Kirby, et al., 2006) is a practice for researchers’ evaluation of their assumptions, interpretations, and position related to the research.
Throughout the research process and particularly during the data analysis phase, I consistently reviewed my assumptions and questioned my position as I interpreted data into findings. These theories and frameworks influenced this study.

**Study Participants**

All Canadian employers requiring employees with a bachelor’s degree were the population of interest for the study. This included management, and human resources personnel at public, private, and social/volunteer sectors across the country and across industries. The criterion for participation was direct involvement in hiring new employees or promoting existing employees for jobs that required a bachelor’s degree for a Canadian organization over the past five years. Direct involvement constituted reviewing resumes or applications to include or exclude, short-listing for interviews, interviewing, short-listing for examinations or tests, marking examinations or tests, making recommendations for selection, or making final decisions on hiring or promoting employees. Partaking in any of the above activities qualified a person to participate in the study.

I recruited participants based on availability through convenience selection (Henry, 2009), and through personal referral, snowball method. Between November 24, 2013 and February 17, 2014, I recruited a total of 84 participants for the survey and four respondents for the interview. I emailed my personal and professional contacts with an invitation to complete the survey, and asked them to forward the invitation to others they believed met the study criteria. I also used online communities and social networking such as LinkedIn, Facebook and twitter to post the link to the survey. I emailed at least
500 contacts from publicly available electronic business and government directories, and Google listings with the invitation to participate in the survey. In in-person or phone conversations, I asked some of my colleagues and professional contacts to refer me to eligible interview participants.

Although, I recruited participants based on availability through convenience selection (Henry, 2009), I tried to recruit across provinces and territories, sectors, industries, and rural and urban areas to maximize chances for participant diversity. I used municipal and provincial directories for a number of municipalities, cities, provinces and territories, as well as federal department and agency listings to identify human resources and management personnel across the country. I also used Industry Canada business registries and Google search for a range of businesses and university, college, and school board directories. I also monitored the demographic data for the responses as the study progressed and I responsively recruited in the underrepresented geographical areas or industries. Further details are provided under Study Operation.

Study Design

I designed two non-sequential methods, interviews and survey, to explore the research question. The purpose for this design was: 1) to allow for deeper conversations with employers through interviews, and 2) to include the views of as many employers as possible through survey at a basic level.

Interview

I developed a semi-structured interview to engage a small number of employers across Canada in detailed conversations about online degrees. See Appendix B for
interview questions. The interviews were 30 to 60 minutes long. I conducted the interviews in-person or via web conferencing. The interviews contained six questions to gather data on the following: 1) employers’ attitudes towards online degrees from accredited Canadian universities when it comes to hiring, 2) employers’ attitudes towards online degrees from accredited Canadian universities when it comes to promoting, 3) employers’ stated practices of hiring graduates with online degrees from accredited Canadian institutions, 4) employers’ general perceptions of online university education, and 5) employers’ experience, exposure, and familiarity with online education.

The questionnaire included targeted, open-ended, and flexible questions to facilitate both focused and fluid conversations. I used two hypothetical scenario questions, one related to hiring new employees and the other related to promoting existing employees, to gather participants’ specific preferences related to hiring and promoting employees. This approach was inspired by Adams et al.’s (2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2012) studies, which used two hypothetical hiring scenarios, each describing two applicants who were identical in terms of their history, experience, and age except the educational environment for their degree. In each scenario participants were asked to choose between one of two applicants: Scenario 1: applicant with a conventional degree or applicant with an online degree, and Scenario 2: applicant with a conventional degree or applicant with a hybrid degree (Adams & DeFleur, 2005; Adams & DeFleur, 2006; Adams et al., 2007; Adams, 2008; Adams, et al., 2012). In this study, I chose the scenario approach; however, I included a neutral option of “no preference” in both the hiring and job promotion scenarios. Furthermore, I developed four semi-structured questions to gather the experiences, stated practices, and perceptions of Canadian employers towards
online degrees. Demographic questions related to age, sex, job category, highest level of education, experience with online education, and organization’s primary business and size were included for data analysis purposes.

Survey

I developed a short online survey to gather general views of employers across Canada on online degrees. See Appendix C for survey questions. To host the survey I used FluidSurveys, a Canadian research platform. The survey included three multiple-choice questions with follow-ups, one open text question, and demographic questions designed to gather data on the following: 1) employers’ preference of online versus on-campus degrees from accredited Canadian institutions when it comes to hiring, 2) employers’ preference of online versus on-campus degrees from accredited Canadian institutions when it comes to promoting, and 3) employers’ general views on online bachelor’s degrees from Canadian universities. On average, participants completed the survey in six minutes. In order to reduce possible chances of multiple attempts by a single respondent, I set survey settings to allow one attempt per computer. I discarded incomplete surveys.

Validity and Reliability

Validity refers to how well an instrument measures what it is purported to measure. In order to ensure the instruments were valid, I followed the steps in the scientific method (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2002). I began with the research question, narrowed down the question into measurable components, designed the survey and interview questions, collected data, analyzed the data, described the findings, and referred back to the research question. Related to construct validity, as to whether the theoretical
concept matched with the measurement (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2002), I designed scenario-based questions to gather data for two sub-questions of the study and ensured answer options were inclusive.

Reliability refers to the repeatability of the study producing same results (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2002). Given that this study was based on a convenient sample, future studies using the same instruments might not produce the same results. However, I ensured that language used and instructions in the survey and the interviews were clear. I also, ensured multiple references to the data were available during the analysis phase. Both the audio recordings and the transcripts were available for the interview analysis. I also consistently checked that data exports from the surveying tool to Excel format were accurate by cross checking with the data stored in the survey system. Furthermore, at any point when data sorting and organizations occurred during the analysis, I ensured that data was accurately sorted and organized and no data loss or misplacement resulted.

**Design Considerations**

Multi-modal data collection, and participant availability, a balance between consistency and personalization, efficiency and costs were the main design considerations in this study. I employed two data gathering methods, qualitative semi-structured interviews to engage in detailed conversations with a select number of employers, and a structured survey to gather general reactions from employers across the country.

Furthermore, I particularly considered the intended participants and their availability in the design of the research instruments. To reduce time commitment requirements and minimize the risk of participant boredom and attrition, I designed the interview to take approximately 30 – 60 minutes and the survey to take 3 – 10 minutes. In
addition, data gathering methods were non-sequential and independent. A person could complete both the interview and the survey; however, the study did not require participants to do both. The survey and the interview included a question to account for participants completing both.

The interview included two questioning styles, scenario-based questions and semi-structured questions with specified leading questions. The scenario-based questions, inspired by Adams et al. (2012) study of acceptability of online degrees in the United States, included concrete examples for comparability where all other factors were constant except for the delivery modality of the degree. However, in contrast with Adams et al.’s (2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2012) studies, which did not include a neutral option in answer options, I included a “no preference” option in the scenarios. The semi-structured questions provided me with flexibility (Seibold, 2007) in directing the interviews and engaging participants in fluid conversations related to their stated practices, experiences, and attitudes towards online degrees and online education (Seibold, 2007). Through this mix, I ensured both personalization and consistency.

The online survey method was an efficient and inexpensive way to gather the reactions of as many Canadian employers as possible on online degrees at a basic level. To increase participation and reduce attrition rates, I designed the survey to be short and concise. The survey contained two multiple-choice scenario questions, same as the interviews, with follow-ups depending on the responses, one open-ended question, and demographic questions for analysis.
Testing

I tested the design of the interview and survey by conducting one interview and five surveys with volunteers, who were my friends, RRU classmates and work colleagues. The testing took place during the month of November after the approval of the ethics application. The primary objective for this process was to minimize the risk that participants misinterpret a question or find any questions offensive.

Through the process of testing, I was able to verify the research methods and resolve flaws in the research instruments. Volunteers noticed issues in the wording and question sequencing. As a result, I amended the question wording and sequencing. Furthermore, I tested the inclusiveness of answer options, and estimated time required for completion of an interview and the survey. I also evaluated reactions of volunteers toward demographic questions including their willingness to respond to them.

I treated the small data set from testing as test data. I reviewed the data to ensure that the methods could produce required data to respond to the research question. I did not include the data in the study and discarded the set before the official launch of the research.

Study Operation

I launched the study on November 24, 2013 after receiving the approval of ethics application and validation of the study. I gathered data until February 17, 2014. I used personal and professional contacts, online communities and social networking, electronic business and government directories, and Google listings to recruit participants.
Interviews

I conducted a total of four interviews between December 16, 2013 and February 1, 2014. I recruited three participants through referrals from colleagues and friends through snowball method. The fourth participant was my former colleague through convenience selection. I attempted to recruit more respondents; however, I faced challenges in scheduling appointments with two potential participants, and some employers declined participation expressing that their organizations did not support their involvement in research studies.

I sent an email invitation describing the purpose of the study, participation criteria and commitment requested from the participants, along with consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation and anonymity guidelines to prospective participants. I made the interview arrangements with participants via email and telephone. Before the interview appointments, I sent an electronic consent form and a background on the study to potential participants, asking them to sign the forms for the appointment if they agreed to participate. I verified completion of forms prior to initiating any of the interviews.

At the interview appointment, I summarized key components of informed consent to participants. I emphasized that participation was voluntary and anonymous, and participants had the right to discontinue at any moment. I also asked participants if they had any questions about the study or their role.

Interviews were conducted in-person or via web conferencing and ranged between 30 and 60 minutes. I conducted two interviews in-person at the offices of the participants who resided in Ottawa. I conducted the other two via Skype and FaceTime, respondent’s
tool of choice, with those in other parts of the country. I made every effort to minimize noise, distractions, and technical difficulties.

With participants’ permissions, I recorded the interviews using a digital audio recorder. By recording the interviews, I had full attention in directing the questions, observing the non-verbal, and probing and clarifying. Audios were transcribed after the interview. At the end of the interviews, I thanked participants for their time and for sharing their views. I also invited participants to receive the results of the study once the study is complete. All four welcomed the invitation.

**Survey**

The online survey was live through FluidSurveys between November 24, 2013 and February 17, 2014. A total of 84 employers completed the survey. I included a qualifying question to engage the population of interest and discontinue the survey for those who did not meet the criteria for participation. In order to reduce chances of duplicates I set the survey system to allow one survey per computer. I did not include data from incomplete surveys in the study and discarded the incomplete surveys when I closed data gathering on Feb 17, 2014.

Recruitment for the survey included three methods with varying success rates. First, I distributed the survey via email, social media Inbox, or instant messaging to personal and professional contacts, and community networks, who were also encouraged to share the invitation with others they believed could quality. This method was most effective, gathering 65 responses in total. Second, I gathered email addresses through online business and government directories such as Government of Canada’s Electronic Directory (GED), provincial and municipal government listings, Canada’s Top 100
employers directory, and Industry Canada’s listings of businesses and organizations. This method returned a total of 17 completed surveys. The final and least effective method was distribution of survey through social media including Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook to HR professionals, managers, directors, and professional communities. This method returned two completed surveys.

The mode time for survey completion was six minutes. About 70% of participants took between two to 17 minutes to complete. The longest completion times were 3 hours and 20 minutes and 1 hour and 2 minutes. I suspect these two surveys were delayed in submission. Overall, the survey was short and efficient.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the interview and the survey were primarily qualitative. I used qualitative data analysis techniques and descriptive statistics to analyze the data.

Interview Analysis

I used thematic analysis to analyze interview data. First, I reviewed the interview transcripts, and my personal memos for each interview independently and summarized key points for each interview in 100 to 200 words. Table 3.1 shows the summary template for each interview.

Table 3.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Analysis For Interview Participant x</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant ID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference in hiring scenario and reasons for preference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference in promotion scenario and reasons for</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Next, I exported transcripts to Dedoose, a qualitative and mixed methods analysis software, for coding. I read the transcripts in detail and coded excerpts. After I coded all transcripts, I transferred the excerpts to Word format and reviewed the text cumulatively. I merged common content and identified contrasting patterns. At the end of this process, themes and patterns in data emerged. Chapter Five presents detailed thematic findings.

**Survey Analysis**

I used descriptive statistics, and thematic analysis to analyze survey data. First, I summarized the data set and its main features using descriptive statistics. I used select demographic characteristics including stated experience and exposure with online education to assess any trends in data. Finally, I read, sorted, and thematically organized the responses to the open-ended questions.

**Threats to Validity**

I identified threats to external validity, misinterpretation of questions, multiple possible attempts, representation of sample, and researcher bias as threats to validity of this study.
External Validity

I used a convenient sampling in this study. Because convenient sampling is a non-probability sampling method, the results of this study with data from 87 participants might not be representative of the larger population of employers in Canada. In order to make generalizations about employer attitudes towards online degrees in employment situations, future studies should employ probability sampling.

Misinterpretation of Questions

Participants might have misinterpreted the questions. This might have influenced the way they have responded to a question and chosen their wording, which might have affected the results of the study. Although I validated the survey questions with five volunteers and interview questions with one volunteer, the risk might have still persisted.

Multiple Possible Attempts

I set the survey software to receive one attempt per device. Although I employed this measure to reduce the risk of multiple attempts by the same participant, I could not have eliminated the threat entirely. If a participant accessed the survey on different devices, she or he would have submitted more than one survey. Eliminating this risk was highly unlikely given the software and the complexities of user identification.

Non-probability Sampling

The convenience sampling method selected for the study was a non-probability sampling method. Non-probability sampling does not produce a representative sample. The findings from this study, therefore, are not generalizable.
Researcher Bias

As the student researcher pursuing a graduate degree through online education, I might have researcher bias. Although I completed my undergraduate studies through face-to-face campus-based education, my most recent education has been via online programming. My personal experiences might have influenced me in the wording of the questions and might have manifested during the interviews.

To mitigate personal bias, I exercised the following practices. I asked two independent researchers, not associated with any online educational institution, to review the interview questionnaire and the survey instrument. Furthermore, during the interviews I refrained from sharing personal experiences and tried to remain neutral to any comments made by the participants. In analyzing and writing the results, I constantly questioned my interpretations and analysis and referred to original transcripts and sources of data to reexamine my analyses.

Limitations

The study included three main limitations. First, I used a convenient sample of Canadian employers as opposed to a representative sample in this study. The findings are, therefore, not generalizable. Second, given the availability of resources and my location, I was not able to conduct all interviews in person. This posed a limitation in that web conferencing might not have been as effective as meeting in person to establish rapport with participants. Third, the study included a total of four interviews, each approximately 30 – 60 minutes. This amount of interviewing time might be considered limited. However, rather than exclusively studying a smaller group through interviews, I sought
the participation of employers across Canada in a short survey to express their views. These limitations influenced the study.

**Delimitations**

I made three main choices to delimit the scope of the study. First, I designed the survey to be brief so to engage participants and reduce attrition. Second, I did not use statistical tests to analyze the survey results. Instead, I used descriptive statistics as a convenient way to present the findings. Third, I limited the scope of the study geographically to only include Canadian experience. These delimitations influenced the findings.

**Ethics**


**Summary**

The methodology for this mixed-methods study consisted of qualitative semi-structured interviews and an online survey of a convenient sample of Canadian
employers. The aim for this design was to allow for deeper conversations with a select number of participants and explore the reactions of a larger number of employers towards online degrees in employment scenarios. The criterion for participation was involvement in hiring or promoting employees for jobs that require university education. This included managers, senior management and human resources personnel, at Canadian organizations in the public, private and volunteer-social sectors. I used a scenario-based approach along with open-ended questions to design the interview and survey instruments. To increase level of participation and reduce attrition, I purposefully designed the interview and survey to be efficient. I validated research instruments with volunteers and identified and resolved flaws in the interview and survey questionnaires. I collected data over approximately three months, November 24, 2013 to February 17, 2014. I analyzed data using thematic analysis and descriptive statistics. I identified threats to external validity, non-probability sampling, multiple possible survey attempts, researcher bias, and misinterpretation of questions as threats to validity of this study. Although the use of a small number of interviews was a limiting factor in this study, the interviews conducted were in-depth conversations with four participants and were complemented with the views of 84 survey respondents.
Chapter Four: Findings I

The findings of the study are presented in Chapter Four and Chapter Five. Chapter Four includes results of the hypothetical hiring and employment promotion scenarios posed in four interviews and 84 surveys. Interview results are presented first, followed by the findings of the survey. I analyzed the results using mere exposure theory (Seibold, 2007) to discern any connections between the exposure and experience of employers with online learning and their preferences in hiring and promoting employees related to their educational background. Chapter Five follows with a thematic analysis of the qualitative responses not included in Chapter Four.

Interviews

I conducted a total of four semi-structured interviews, two via web-conferencing and two in-person. Interviews ranged between 30 to 60 minutes, and provided the opportunity to engage in rich conversations with a select number of employers about their views on online degrees in employment situations. The interviews included two hypothetical scenarios, one related to hiring and another related to employment promotion, and four semi-structured leading questions. Below is a summary of participant demographics and the findings.

Participant Demographics

Interview participants varied in their demographic characteristics; however, there were some similarities amongst them. Respondents ranged between 28 to 43 years of age. Two of the participants were female and the other two were male. As to highest level of education, three participants had bachelor’s degrees, and one had a master’s degree.
Participants lived and worked in three provinces; two were from Ontario, one was from British Columbia, and the fourth was from Manitoba. All four respondents resided in urban areas with populations of over 500,000. Tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 show age range and sex, highest level of education, and province of work and residence of the interview participants.

Table 4.1

*Age Range and Sex of Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25 to 29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 39</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 to 44</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2

*Highest Education of Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Education</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3

*Province of Work and Residence of Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province of Work</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British Columbia</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manitoba</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants worked in the Canadian public, private, and volunteer sectors in management or human resources positions. One was an HR specialist for a non-profit organization, and the remaining three were managers in areas other than human resources
in public or private agencies. Table 4.4 shows sector and current job of interview participants.

Table 4.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>HR Specialist</th>
<th>Manager</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social or Volunteer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents worked for small and large organizations in four different industries. Two worked for organizations of 101 – 500 staff, and the other two were employed at organizations with 1001 – 5000 employees. Respondents worked in healthcare, government, construction, and finance and banking. Table 4.5 shows industries and organization size of interview participants.

Table 4.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Organization Size</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>101 - 500</td>
<td>1001 - 5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance and Banking</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Exposure and experience with online learning.** Respondents had varying levels of exposure and experience with online learning. Three participants had direct experience by taking online university or college courses, or job related e-learning. All participants had indirect exposure to online education by knowing someone who had taken an online university or college course or program.
Direct experience. Three of the four participants had direct experience with online learning through university or college education, or professional development and training. One participant was enrolled in an HR certification program at the time of the interview. Another participant had taken work related e-learning, and an online undergraduate university course in early 2000s. The third participant had completed self-paced online training modules for his job. Table 4.6 shows interview participants’ direct experience with online learning.

Table 4.6
Interview Participants’ Direct Experience with Online Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taken…</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online college courses (any level)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online university courses (any level)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete program at a college online or at distance (any level)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete program at a university online or at distance (any level)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e-learning for training or professional development</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two participants who had taken online courses at a college or university had different experiences. The respondent enrolled in an online certification program at a college was satisfied with the program and appreciated the flexibility and convenience it offered her. However, the other participant, who had taken an online university research or statistics course in the early 2000s, said he had not enjoyed the online format and had missed the face-to-face interaction with a professor. The same participant had also taken a tele-course in the 2000s. Related to the tele-course, he said he had found the experience worthwhile as he could see a professor and a classroom environment through television.

Indirect exposure. All four participants had indirect exposure to online undergraduate or graduate education by knowing someone who had taken online courses.
One participant said his brother had taken online university courses at a fully online Canadian institution. Another stated he knew a client who had a master’s degree from an online institution in the UK, and another client who was enrolled in an online MBA program at a Canadian institution. Both participants stated that the individuals they knew who had taken online learning had positive experiences with online education. The other two participants stated that they were aware of team members and staff in their organization who had completed or were enrolled in online graduate or undergraduate education; however, they did not know much about their educational experience. Table 4.7 shows interview participants’ indirect exposure to online post-secondary or graduate education.

Table 4.7

*Interview Participants’ Indirect Exposure to Online Learning at Post-secondary or Graduate Level*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knows someone who has taken online program or course at a university (any level)</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knows someone(s) with positive experience</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows someone(s) with negative experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows someone(s) with neutral experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows someone(s) with positive and someone(s) with negative experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows someone(s) but doesn't know much about their experience</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doesn't know anyone who has taken online or distance program or course</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interest in online education.** All four participants had considered or were considering pursuing online education for undergraduate or graduate studies, or professional certifications. At the time of the interview, one of the participants was completing her HR certification through online education at an Ontario college. Another participant had researched two online MBA programs at Canadian institutions outside his
province; however, because the programs cost significantly higher than any campus-based MBA he could pursue in his province, he decided against taking an online MBA. The third participant said he was planning to enroll in an online MBA at a Canadian or American institution in the next few years. Finally, the fourth respondent stated that she had contemplated taking undergraduate studies in journalism through online education in the 1990s. However, she had been unable to find any journalism programs through online education then. She explained,

“[…] At that time I was interested in journalism […], and there were only two schools at university level in Ontario that offered that. Whereas now, I could have applied to any university across the country, for example, who knows maybe I would have considered universities that were outside the country. So, I think it [online education] would have changed possibilities”.

Table 4.8 shows participants’ interest in completing online programs, and Table 4.9 indicates direct experience, indirect exposure, and interest in online learning per participant.

Table 4.8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Considered an online degree or certification program</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes and currently enrolled in one</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes but could not take the program(s) due to cost</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes but could not find the right program</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes and planning to enroll in the near future</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never considered any online program</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.9

*Interview Participants’ Direct Experience, Indirect Exposure, and Interest in Online Education*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>A</strong></td>
<td><strong>B</strong></td>
<td><strong>C</strong></td>
<td><strong>D</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taken online college or university course(s)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indirect exposure</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows someone(s) with positive experience</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows someone(s) with negative experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows some(s) with neutral experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows someone(s) with positive and someone(s) with negative experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows someone(s) but doesn’t know much about their experience</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Considered an online or distance degree or certification program</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes and currently enrolled in one</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes but could not find the right program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes and planning to enroll in the near future</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes but could not take the program due to cost</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Involvement in hiring or promoting employees.** Three participants were managers and one was an HR specialist, all of whom had directly participated in hiring and promoting employees for jobs that required a bachelor’s degree in their organizations over the past five years. All four had interviewed applicants and had made recommendations on hiring candidates. Two participants had made final decisions on hiring. Three had performed short-listing for interviews. All participants met the participation criteria. Table 4.10 shows participants’ involvement in hiring activities over the past five years.

Table 4.10

*Interview Participants’ Involvement in Hiring Activities over the Past Five Years*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reviewing resumes, applications to eliminate or include as possible candidates</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-listing for interviews</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-listing for examinations or tests</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewing</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marking examinations or tests</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making recommendations on hiring a candidate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making a final decision on hiring a candidate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Findings**

The findings of the interviews generally indicated a positive view of online degrees, although some areas of concern were raised and one of the participants had a negative attitude towards online degrees. The participant who expressed negative views towards online degrees had taken an online university course in the 2000s and had not enjoyed the experience. No other possible connections between participants’ experience,
exposure, and interest in online learning and their views on online degrees were observed.

**Preference in hiring situations.** Participants were presented with a hypothetical hiring scenario, where there was only one vacancy and there were two applicants. All factors, including experience and age, were equal for the two job applicants except the modality of their degrees; one had obtained a degree through online programming and the other had completed a degree through face-to-face campus education. Participants were then asked which of the two applicants they would prefer to hire. Three of the four respondents stated no preference between the two applicants. However, the fourth respondent expressed a preference for the applicant with face-to-face education. The hypothetical scenario was presented before asking participants about their experience and familiarity with online education.

**No preference.** The three respondents with no preference were further probed as to whether an online degree may pose any concerns to them at all in hiring situations. One respondent noted, “It is just that if they have it [a degree], then they have it,” and the modality of educational delivery is not a matter for consideration. Another stated, “[…] I am looking for a degree and education, but there has to be other competencies that have to support that. It [the degree] would not ever be examined by itself. It would be a first level screening”. The third participant stated, “I think there will be a little more scrutiny put into which institution the online degree came from, but the fact that it is online wouldn't by itself be an issue”.
One of the respondents explained that she would evaluate an applicant’s area of study to choose the most suitable candidate for a job regardless of the delivery modality of the degree. She said,

“I would not be concerned about what type of location the education was done in, what I would be looking to compare would be the area of study […]. The subjects studied would be very relevant because a degree may be all encompassing, but maybe the position requires a specific competency in greater depth over another. So, for example, if the degree encompasses statistical analysis, but I needed somebody who was a strong communicator, then I would look for courses that supported that […]”.

**Preference for applicant with campus-based degree.** The fourth respondent, however, stated preference for the applicant with campus-based education in the hiring scenario. “If everything else were equal, I would hire the one that had attended campus education”. He explained that he believed the in-person and hands-on experience and the kinds of discussions that take place in a face-to-face classroom environment were unavailable in online education.

**Perceptions of HR practices.** When asked about the initial screening processes and practices by human resources and staffing personnel in the organizations, two of the four participants provided detailed responses. One of the respondents firmly stated that he did not believe there would be anybody in their organization that would disqualify a candidate because an applicant had an online versus campus-based degree. He explained that their organization has an affiliation with an American online institution and promotes
opportunities for employees to further their post-secondary education with the online affiliate. He added,

“I think if we did not actively promote the opportunities for employees to enhance their post-secondary education through our online affiliate, it might have been open to discretion or interpretation by certain people in the organization. But, since it is in our policy to try to retain and develop our workforce and part of that retention and development is online, internally for us, it will not be a detriment in anyway [that an applicant has an online degree] in any shape or form”.

Another respondent believed that Canadian hiring personnel would not disqualify candidates with Canadian degrees regardless of the delivery modality; however, he stated that he believed some Canadian employers would disregard applicants with international education. He explained,

“I don’t think any applicant would get disqualified on the basis that they have an online degree versus campus-based. I would find it very hard to believe. Now, I would, on the other hand, say that if there was education from out of Canada versus in Canada, I have seen many situations where especially locals here in Canada would disqualify [an applicant]”.

Overall, 3 of 4 interview respondents indicated no preference in hiring situations between an applicant with an online degree and an applicant with a campus-based degree from Canadian institutions. Some expressed that they considered educational qualification as a screening factor rather than a determining element in hiring. In contrast, respondents stated that demonstrable competencies would be essential considerations in
hiring. Factors respondents referred to in assessing educational qualifications included credibility of institution and area of study.

**Preference in employment promotion situations.** Similar to the hypothetical hiring scenario, participants were presented with an employment promotion situation. In this situation, there was one opening and two candidates in the employer’s team. All factors including age and experience were equal except that one of the candidates had completed a degree through online education and the other had completed a degree through face-to-face campus-based education. Participants were then asked which of the two candidates they would prefer to promote.

All four respondents indicated no preference between online versus campus-based degrees in the employment promotion scenario. One respondent stated, “as long as performance was exactly the same and there were no indicators or red flags associated with either one, the online versus traditional wouldn't factor in my decision”. Others explained that educational background and degrees were factors they considered when hiring employees; however, once hired, it was the performance, application of knowledge, and acquisition of experience that counted. One respondent stated, “When I am hiring someone [for the first time], that is when I see their education. What they have got. Once they have entered the company, it would truly depend on their performance reviews and what they have done”. Another noted that it would be the application of knowledge and experience that she would consider when promoting one employee over the other. She added,

“It is not strictly what they have studied, and where, or how, because I think that is the first level [of hiring] […] that is their [first] foundation. And then, in the
workforce, you begin building the second foundation, which is your experience, and how you go about gaining it and that is what I would be using to determine which employee I would promote”.

One of the respondents expressed that a more recent degree could factor in promoting one employee over the other. She elaborated that more recent education would indicate that the candidate is more up-to-date with the developments and methodologies in that field and could mean that the candidate would bring new perspectives to the role. She concluded that the candidate therefore would bring value to the organization.

Finally, a participant noted that an employee’s efforts to pursue studies while working could indicate ambition and initiative, which could benefit them in job promotion situations. She explained,

“An individual who was pursuing studies while already employed demonstrates maybe greater initiative […]. Likely, when an individual is doing that, it means that […] they are looking to advance themselves. […] In the public service you do need to have a degree or area of study for certain positions, so it means that they are taking the time and steps to try to get that [qualification]”.

Overall, findings indicated that respondents did not have any preference between graduates of online versus campus-based education in employment promotion situations. Furthermore, respondents expressed that they considered educational qualification as a measure for screening when they were first hiring someone. Participants stated that they evaluated employees’ performance, application of knowledge, and acquisition of experience when promoting employees. This may suggest that education is not as critical a factor in employment promotion situations as it is in hiring situations.
**Stated practices in hiring or promoting online degree graduates.** Participants were asked whether they had hired anyone with an online bachelor’s degree for jobs that required post-secondary education. Two employers stated that they had. One manager explained with certainty that they had hired an applicant who was in the process of completing a bachelor’s degree at Athabasca University. Although the job required completion of a degree, they still considered the candidate because he was in the process of obtaining this credential. The recruitment specialist from the health organization expressed that she believed their organization had hired people with online master’s degrees from institutions that have a reputation as online universities. She added, “Some universities offer programs that are in-person or online, and we always don’t really know if it is online. I am assuming we have recruited some people as well where their degree could have been online”.

One respondent recalled that they had received an application with an online degree; however, due to lack of required work experience, the person did not qualify. The fourth respondent stated that she was not aware if they had hired anyone with an online degree. She explained that she had frequently seen online programs as studies and training for professional development rather than for post-secondary education on applications.

**Distinguishing online from non-online degrees.** Employers were asked how they would distinguish if a degree was obtained through online or non-online programming. They stated that they associated certain American and Canadian institutions with online degrees. All four said that when they saw Athabasca, they would know the degree was obtained for online education. However, in most other cases, they
stated that based on a resume or copy of a diploma they would not know if a degree was for online education or for campus-based learning. One respondent explained,

“I do know that Athabasca University does offer online learning and has been spearheading it. So, that is familiar as a brand [for online education]. […] But increasingly I know other organizations do or have similar practices. I think Queens has an online program”.

Another respondent noted, “[…] you know some universities offer programs that are in-person or online. So, we always don’t really know [if it is online or campus-based]”. Finally, another participant explained that although he knew certain universities such as Queens and Royal Roads offer online education, he did not necessarily associate them with online degrees because they have a physical campus. Overall, respondents expressed that except for degrees from one Canadian institution in most other cases they would not know if a degree was for online or campus-based education.

Survey

A total of 84 individuals responded to the online survey. One of the respondents also completed the interview after the survey. The survey was an efficient means to gather the views of participants across Canada related to online university degrees in employment situations. The survey included the same two hypothetical scenarios as the interview, one related to hiring and another related to job promotion, and an open text question. The following is a summary of participant demographics and the findings.
Participant Demographics

Participants were diverse in their demographic characteristics; however, with respect to the following characteristics there was higher representation of a certain group or groups over others. First, although respondents ranged between 23 and 70 years of age, 54% were between 30 and 44. Second, there was a higher representation of males than females, with 57% identifying as male and 43% identifying as female. Finally, about 90% of participants were living in cities with populations of 100,000 and over. Tables 4.11, 4.12, and 4.13 respectively show age range, sex, and home population of the survey respondents.

Table 4.11

Age Range of Survey Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 to 24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 29</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 34</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 39</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 to 44</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 to 49</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 to 54</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 59</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 to 64</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 to 69</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 to 74</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>84</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean = 44

Table 4.12

Sex of Survey Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>84</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.13

*Home Population of Survey Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1,000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000 to 29,999</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30,000 to 99,999</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,000 and over</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>84</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of participants had completed undergraduate and/or graduate studies. About 86% had a university degree, professional degree, graduate degree, professional designation, or doctorate. About 2% of participants had a college or trade certificate, and 7% declared they had a college diploma. The remaining 5% had some post-secondary. All participants at some point had attended a post-secondary institution, which indicated their familiarity with post-secondary educational environment. Figure 4.1 shows participants’ highest level of education per category.

*Figure 4.1*

Highest Level of Education of Survey Participants
Employers from six provinces across the country participated in the survey. Manitoba and Ontario employers made up the largest proportions at about 35.7% and 34.5% each. About 14% were employers from British Columbia and 9.5% worked in Alberta. Newfoundland and Quebec employers made up the remaining 4%. Figure 4.2 shows participation levels by province of work.

Figure 4.2
Province of Work of Survey Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newfoundland and Labrador</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alberta</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Columbia</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manitoba</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Employers from all sectors responded to the survey. Public sector employers constituted the largest proportion at 60%. Private and volunteer-social sector respondents made up 33% and 5% of the sample. About 2.5% were not employed. Figure 4.3 shows participation levels by sector.
Participants worked for organizations of various sizes. About 14% worked for companies, agencies, and institutions with 10,001 employees or more. Approximately 22% were employed at organizations of 1,001 to 10,000 employees. About 33% worked for organizations of 101 to 1000 staff. The remaining 31% worked for organizations of 100 employees or fewer.
Most respondents worked in management or HR. Their current position ranged from staffing assistant to chief human resources in the HR occupations, and from supervisor to chief executive officer in the non-HR management positions. Approximately 16% were working in the HR field and 78% were in management or senior management. Senior management positions were defined to include directors and above. Those identifying as team lead, supervisor, manager and chair of academic faculty were categorized under management. Finally, 8% of participants were professionals including engineers and architects, and the remaining 4% included undisclosed occupations, retired persons, and persons on leave. Generally, a variety of personnel participating in hiring and promoting employees at Canadian organizations were represented in the convenient sample. Figure 4.5 represents participation levels by employment category.
Experience with online learning. Participants were asked whether they had ever taken online or distance learning as part of their education, training, or career development. The majority, about two thirds, responded that they had participated in online or distance learning. However, one third stated that they had not taken any online or distance learning. Figure 4.5 illustrates survey participants’ participation in online and distance learning for education, training, or career development.
Participants who stated that they had taken online or distance learning were asked a follow-up question to indicate the type of online or distance learning they had engaged in. About 72% had taken e-learning courses and 75% had participated in virtual training, webinars, etcetera for work and professional development. About 23% had enrolled in correspondence studies, and 68% had participated in online university or college courses. Finally, 28% had completed a college or university program through online education.

Figure 4.6 shows survey participants’ participation in online or distance learning by type of online or distance learning.
Involvement in hiring or promoting employees. Participants stated that they had partaken in hiring, promoting, or both over the past five years. About 96% had been involved in hiring, 48% of whom had also participated in promoting employees. The remaining 4% had only partaken in promoting employees. Figure 4.7 shows survey participants’ involvement in hiring or promoting employees.
Findings

Survey findings generally indicated support for online degrees in hiring and promoting situations by employers in this study. However, some participants expressed perceived deficiencies in online education. General participation in online learning, as an indicator of exposure and experience with online education, did not present any patterns with preferences in hiring or promoting employees. However, participation in specific types of online or distance education indicated some patterns.

Preference in hiring scenario. Participants were presented with a hypothetical hiring scenario, where the respondents would have one vacancy to fill and two applicants to choose from. All factors were equal except one applicant had a university degree for studies completed through online education and the other had a university degree for studies completed through campus-based education. Both were Canadian degrees. Participants were then presented with four multiple-choice options to choose from.
• I would hire the applicant with the online degree.

• I would hire the applicant with the degree obtained through face-to-face campus education.

• I don't have any specific preference of one over the other.

• Other. Please specify:

The majority of participants, 64%, indicated that they had no preference of one applicant over the other. About 18% indicated a preference for the graduate of face-to-face campus education. The remaining 18% selected “other”. Figure 4.8 illustrates participants’ selection in the hiring scenario.

Figure 4.8
Survey Participants’ Preferences in Hiring Scenario

Upon a review of the text explanations for “other” option in the hiring scenario, responses were adjusted. Nine responses as “other” represented no preference of one applicant over the other applicant; in contrast, one response indicated a preference for the applicant with face-to-face campus-based degree. Examples of responses adjusted for no
preference included the following. “I don't have any specific preference of one over the other - based on education alone I would treat each equally and would have to look at their overall qualification in conjunction with their education.” “It would depend on their experience and fit for the role.” The response that was changed to preference for the applicant with campus-based degree indicated, “[…] In general the two would be considered almost equal but face to face, all other things being equal, would likely have more weight”. The adjustment, therefore, reduced the proportion of respondents with the “other” option to 6%, and increased the proportion of participants with no preference to 75% and the proportion of respondents with a preference to hire the applicant with face-to-face degree to 19%. Table 4.14 and Figure 4.9 show original and adjusted response rates in the hiring scenario.

Table 4.14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Original</th>
<th></th>
<th>Adjusted</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No specific preference to hire one over the other</td>
<td>54 64%</td>
<td>63 75%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer to hire applicant with face-to-face campus-based degree</td>
<td>15 18%</td>
<td>16 19%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer to hire applicant with online degree</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15 18%</td>
<td>5 6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84 100%</td>
<td>84 100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Text explanations for “other”*. Text explanations for “other” option in the hiring scenario indicated that some employers would consider the reputation and accreditation of the university and the subject matter studied when assessing the educational qualification of an applicant than the modality of the degree. One respondent stated,
“Would consider the reputation of university”. Another noted, “I would have to know that the institution was fully accredited”. A third respondent pointed, “I would hire the best candidate whose subject areas match the job description”.

*Figure 4.9*

*Survey Participants’ Original and Adjusted Responses in Hiring Scenario*

Furthermore, two of the respondents pointed that, depending on the job or skills, they would choose the applicant with an online degree or the person with face-to-face campus-based education. Participants stated, “Depends on job”, and “May depend on the skills gained from the experience”. This suggests that some employers believe that the modality of education facilitates development of certain skills or abilities that may be required for different types of work.
Stated reasons for preference for applicant with campus-based degree. The one fifth of survey participants who responded that they would prefer to hire the applicant with face-to-face degree in the hiring scenario were asked to provide an explanation for their choice in a follow-up question. Below is a thematic summary of their explanations in their wording under researcher-determined themes.

Perceptions of social exposure in face-to-face campus environment:

- “Everything else being equal, the social exposure of being on campus helps.”
- “It [campus-based education] would likely require more interaction with others, adjustment to external environment and people.”
- “The ability to have face-to-face interaction with professors and other classmates provides additional advantages. Education institutions are as much a socializing agent as they are institutions of learning.”

Perceived similarity between campus environment and work environment:

- “I believe a crucial element in higher education is the face-to-face exposure students receive with their peers (group work) and with the faculty, which closely replicates the real working environment.”
- “[…] Peer-to-peer discussions on issues in the classroom are also what take place in boardrooms.”

Perceptions of reduced teamwork in online learning environments:

- “Online classes do not expose students with team working as much as the face-to-face classes [do]. The interactions you get with teammates and teachers are more present in the face-to-face classes. It is very important these days to be able to work with others.”
“I would expect that in a campus setting the candidate would have a better opportunity to work in a team on projects/presentations etc.”

**Perceptions that online degrees are less serious and easier than face-to-face degrees:**

- “Online degree appears less serious... you see ad where you can almost buy an online degree.”
- “[...] Online university has a perception of easy.”
- “[A campus-based degree] can be more difficult to obtain.”
- “In class graduate programs are much more competitive to get into and succeed.”
- “I think I would choose the face-to-face because it's the norm and I don't think online education is quite on par with face-to-face yet.”
- “Bias or assumption that on-campus education is better than distance learning. Especially if it is a recent graduate. If it is someone with experience, then it wouldn't matter as much.”

**Perceptions of academic dishonesty and cheating in online learning environments:**

- “I will also wonder if the applicant really did all the work (exams and assignments) himself [or herself]!”
- “Someone could easily do all the work for the applicant.”

These statements provided insights into why some employers would view online degrees negatively.

**Preference in employee promotion scenario.** To assess participants’ preferences related to the online versus campus-based modality of an applicant’s degree, a similar hypothetical scenario as the hiring situation, was presented to them. Participants were asked to choose between two employees, where all factors were equal except that one
employee had completed a degree through online education and the other had completed a degree through face-to-face campus education at Canadian universities. Participants were then asked to indicate their preference by selecting one of the following four multiple-choice options:

- Promote the employee with online degree.
- Promote the employee with face-to-face campus-based degree.
- I don't have any specific preference of one over the other.
- Other - Please specify:

A large majority of respondents, 88%, stated that they would have no preference for one employee over the other. Approximately 5% indicated a preference for the employee with face-to-face campus-based degree. The remaining 7% selected “other”. I reviewed the text explanations for “other” to analyze what participants meant. In four instances participants did not have any specific preference for one employee over the other based on their education. They had selected “other”, for example, to note that the education modality was not a significant consideration in selecting a candidate; however, they considered factors such as fit for the role and personality more important. I adjusted the count for “other” in such cases to “no preference”, which resulted in an increase in the proportion of responses for “no preference” to 93% and a reduction in the proportion of responses for “other” to 2%. In nine out of ten cases, therefore, an online degree was not a concern for the respondents in the employment promotion situation. Table 4.15 and Figure 4.10 illustrate the original and adjusted response counts and percentages in the employment promotion scenario.
Table 4.15

Survey Participants’ Original and Adjusted Responses in Job Promotion Scenario

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Original Count</th>
<th>Original %</th>
<th>Adjusted Count</th>
<th>Adjusted %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No specific preference to promote one over the other</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer to promote applicant with face-to-face campus-based degree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer to promote applicant with online degree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>84</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>84</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.10

Survey Participants’ Original and Adjusted Responses in Job Promotion Scenario

**Comparison of preferences in the two scenarios.** To determine if participants’ responses differed in the hiring and promotion scenarios, I compared each individual’s responses to the two questions. Two significant differences were detected. First, about 87% of participants who had stated a preference for the applicant with the face-to-face degree in the hiring scenario indicated no preference related to the modality of
applicants’ degrees in the promotion situation. This indicated that for some individuals online degrees presented a concern in hiring, but they did not in employment promotion. Second, approximately 80% of participants who had selected “other” in the hiring scenario had indicated no specific preference related to the modality of an applicant’s degree in the promotion scenario.

Furthermore, to compare consistency of participants’ responses from the hiring scenario to the promotion scenario, I examined each individual’s responses in the two scenarios. About 13% of participants who had indicated a preference for the campus-based degree in the hiring situation had made the same selection in the promotion scenario. In contrast, 95% of participants who had selected no preference for the modality of applicants’ degrees in the hiring scenario had chosen the same in the employment promotion scenario. This indicated that only about one in ten survey participants regarded face-to-face degrees superior to online degrees in both scenarios; however, a high majority of nine out of ten consistently had no preference in either scenario. Table 4.16 shows survey participants’ response consistency rates in the two scenarios.

Table 4.16

*Survey Participants’ Response Consistency Rates between Hiring and Employment Promotion Scenarios*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preference in hiring scenario</th>
<th>Preference in promotion scenario</th>
<th>No specific preference</th>
<th>Face-to-face degree</th>
<th>Prefer online degree</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No specific preference</td>
<td>No specific preference</td>
<td>60 (95%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>63 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer face-to-face</td>
<td>Prefer face-to-face</td>
<td>14 (87%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer online degree</td>
<td>Prefer online degree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4 (80%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (20%)</td>
<td>5 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participation in online and distance learning and response choices. Using descriptive statistics, participants’ responses were analyzed for any possible connection between participants’ participation in online and distance learning and their preferences in the hiring scenario. For this convenient sample, no significant relationships were observed related to general participation in online and distance learning and hiring preferences. However, one possible connection between taking an online university course and preference in hiring was detected. Additionally, qualitative statements related to personal experiences with online education at undergraduate or graduate level and response choices in the hiring scenario were compared.

General participation in online learning and stated preferences in hiring. Based on descriptive analysis of each response category and response choices related to general participation in online and distance learning, no relationship was detected between participants’ general participation in online and distance learning and their stated preferences in the hiring scenario. In each of the three response categories, no specific preference in hiring based on degree modality, preference for applicant with face-to-face campus-based degree and “other”, similar proportions of participants had stated that they had participated in online and distance learning, and similar proportions had stated that they had not. Between 20% and 32% in each category had stated that they had never taken online or distance learning, and between 67% and 80% had stated that they had taken some form of online or distance learning. Although there was about 10% higher participation rates in online and distance learning by the respondents in the “other” category than in “no preference” and “preference for campus-based” categories, this did not present any significant differences because the “other” category represented 6% of
total participants as compared with the remaining two categories which represented 19% and 75% of total sample. Based on this examination, I concluded that there were no significant patterns between participants’ general participation rates in online and distance learning and their stated preferences in the hiring situation. Figure 4.11 shows survey respondents’ general participation rates in online and distance learning and their preferences in hiring per response category.

Figure 4.11

*Survey Respondents’ General Participation Rates in Online or Distance Learning and Preference in Hiring per Response Category*

![Survey Respondents' General Participation Rates in Online or Distance Learning and Preference in Hiring per Response Category](image)

**Types of online and distance learning and stated preferences in hiring.** Data related to participation in online and distance learning were further analyzed for any possible trends between specific types of online and distance learning participants had taken and their response choices in the hiring scenario. Based on this analysis, I found one pattern between taking an online university course and preference in the hiring
scenario. Thirty-eight percent of those who had indicated no preference towards the modality of an applicant’s degree in the hiring scenario had taken an online course at a university as compared with 25% of those who preferred the campus-based graduate in the hiring scenario and had taken an online university course. At a descriptive statistics level, this indicated some relationship between taking an online university course and an increased level of stated neutrality towards the modality of an applicant’s degree in the hiring scenario. Furthermore, there were higher rates of participation in all types of online and distance learning available in the survey by the participants’ in the “other” category as compared with the participants with a preference for campus-based degrees and participants with no preference. Additionally, although the “other” category represented only 6% of total participants, participants in this category were most exposed to online and distance learning. Table 4.17 shows survey respondents’ participation rates in e-learning, and virtual training and webinars for work and professional development. Table 4.18 indicates survey respondents’ participation rates in correspondence studies, and online college and university courses and programs.

Table 4.17

*Survey Respondents’ Participation in e-learning, and Virtual Training and Webinars for work and professional development*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>No specific preference</th>
<th>Campus-based degree</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>% of total participants in this category</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e-learning for work, prof development</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>7.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual training, Webinars, etc.</td>
<td>31.00</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>8.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4.18

**Survey Respondents’ Participation in Correspondence Studies, and Online College and University Courses and Programs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>No specific preference</th>
<th>Campus-based degree</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>% of total participants in this category</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence studies</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online college courses (any level)</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online university courses (any level)</td>
<td>24.00</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete program at a college</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete program at a university</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Positive or negative experiences and response choices.** Four survey participants provided detailed references to their personal experiences with online education at undergraduate or graduate level. One of the participants who stated dissatisfaction with their online learning experience selected the option to hire the applicant with a campus-based degree in the hiring scenario and expressed negative views in the open-ended question about online degrees. The remaining three participants who expressed personal positive experiences with online education at university or graduate level selected the neutral option in the hiring scenario and stated positive views about online degrees in the open ended question.
Overall, based on descriptive analysis, although no trends between participants’
general participation rates in online and distance learning and their stated preferences
towards hiring applicants with online degrees were observed, a pattern between taking an
online university course and preferences in hiring was detected. An additional 13% in the
category with no preference had taken an online university course as compared with the
category of participants who had indicated preference for campus-based degrees in
hiring. Furthermore, the “other” category, which represented 6% of the sample, had
higher general participation rates in online and distance learning, and higher participation
rates in all specific types of online and distance learning presented in the survey
questionnaire.

Summary

In this chapter, the findings related to the two hypothetical hiring and employment
promotion scenarios posed in four interviews and 84 surveys were presented. The
findings indicated that participants were generally neutral towards online degrees in
hiring and employment promotion situations. In the hiring scenario, about 75% of
interview respondents and 75% of survey respondents indicated no preference in hiring
between the applicant with an online degree and the applicant with a campus-based
degree. However, about 20% of survey respondents and 25% of interview participants
stated a preference for campus-based degrees in the hiring scenario. In the job promotion
scenario, an increased level of neutrality towards modality of degrees was observed. All
interview participants and 93% of survey respondents indicated that an online degree
versus campus-based would receive equal level of consideration. Although both
interview and survey data pointed to a high level of neutrality towards modality of
degrees by employers in this study, results also indicated that between 5% and 25% of study participants had stated reservations in promoting or hiring employees with online degrees.

Using mere exposure theory (Seibold, 2007) as theoretical lens, I reviewed employers’ personal experience and exposure to online and distance learning against their response choices. Interview data indicated one possible connection between a negative experience as a student in online education and negative perceptions of online degrees. One of the interview participants who had taken an online university course in the 2000s, and had not enjoyed the experience, expressed a negative attitude towards online degrees. Similarly, one of the survey participants with a negative personal experience expressed negative views about online education. In contrast, three other survey participants with positive experiences with online education, at graduate or undergraduate level, expressed positive views about online degrees. Furthermore, the category of participants who had stated to be neutral towards the modality of an applicant’s degree in the hiring scenario had about 13% higher participation rates in taking an online university course as compared with the category of participants with a preference for campus-based degrees in the hiring situation.
Chapter Five: Findings II - Thematic Analysis

In this chapter, a thematic analysis of qualitative findings beyond the content of Chapter Four is included. Responses to the open-ended survey question about employers’ general views about online degrees offered by Canadian universities, and data from the four semi-structured interviews were cumulatively analyzed to identify emergent themes related to the research question: How do Canadian employers view online degrees from Canadian institutions as credentials for employment? The emergent themes are organized under the following sections in this chapter: 1) credibility of online degrees, 2) educational quality of online degrees, 3) perceived affordances and constraints of online education, and 4) stated gaps in awareness.

Credibility of Online Degrees

Three themes emerged from the data related to credibility of online degrees, 1) accreditation of universities and programs, 2) credibility of universities, and 3) trust in Canadian education system. In the following analysis, accreditation refers to the recognition of universities by provincial, regional, national, or professional bodies setting standards for education. Credibility of universities refers to study participants’ recognition of universities based on their perceptions of educational standards where accreditation may or may not have been a consideration. Participants’ views on the credibility of online degrees may influence their decision making related to hiring or promoting candidates with online degrees.
Accreditation

Participants frequently discussed the accreditation of programs or universities as a measure of credibility of online degrees. Referring to the accreditation of programs, a participant stated, “I tend to be hiring functional specialists with degrees from accredited programs. As long as the accrediting authority has assessed the program and determined it meets the standards, it [online versus face-to-face] isn't a deciding factor for me”. Another participant noted, “So long as the degree is accredited and recognized, I am fine with it”. These statements signified that for some participants, the specific accreditation of programs by recognized accrediting bodies superseded personal judgments about a candidate’s education. For others, however, universities’ general accreditation mattered. A respondent, for example, referred to provincial requirements for university accreditation and explained that he would not differentiate between an online versus campus-based degree as long as the provincial authorities recognized the university. Other participants stated, “I would want to know that the university is fully accredited”; and “If it is an accredited university, then I feel better about hiring those with online degrees”. Credibility of online degrees, for a number of participants, depended on the accreditation of universities or programs by the accrediting bodies.

Credibility of Institutions

A number of participants discussed the reputation and credibility of institutions as indicators of acceptability of online degrees. In many instances, it was not clear whether participants referred to credibility in objective terms, considering facts establishing credibility of institutions such as student success or accreditation, or in subjective terms, expressing personal beliefs and perceptions of institutions. Therefore, credibility of
institutions, in this discussion, refers to participants’ recognition of universities based on perceptions of institutions where accreditation or measurability of success may or may not have been considered.

Examples of statements where participants referred to the credibility of the university as an indicator of credibility of the degrees included the following. “The essential elements for me would be [...] the credibility of the university;” a respondent stated. Another explained, “As long as the institution is credible, I believe online degrees are as valid as traditional degrees”. A third stated, “I think there will be a little more scrutiny put into which institution the online degree came from, but the fact that it is online wouldn't by itself be an issue”. In these examples participants believed that an online degree would be credible if the institution was considered trustworthy. Although it was not clear in above statements whether participants referred to credibility in subjective terms or objective ways, in another instance, it was apparent that the participant spoke of personal trust. Respondent explained, “My attitude is that a degree is a degree. I would form an opinion based on my trust in the institution that issued it”.

In contrast to above statements, an interview respondent pointed out that credibility of online degrees could have been an issue in the past; however, at present it presented little to no concern. She said,

“If you had asked this question [about online degrees offered by Canadian universities] maybe ten years ago, then ... I think it would have [had] more weight ... but I think now ... it is an entirely different environment. And, ... I would say about 75% of the time, it would not be as much of an issue”.

Overall, to some participants’ trust in the degree granting organizations determined their level of acceptance of online degrees, although one participant stated that online degrees should not present a concern at present.

**Trust in Canadian Education System**

When asked about general views about online degrees offered by Canadian universities, some participants explicitly compared Canadian education with that of other countries and stated trust in the Canadian system. For example, a participant noted, “I think they [online degrees] are a fair representation for higher learning. Canada seems to have more rigour than other countries”. Another explained,

“I think Canadian degrees are of a high relative quality, regardless of whether they are earned online or in the classroom. Degrees in general represent, to me, proof that an applicant was able to commit, complete work, and achieve a goal.

The question asks about my opinion on degrees earned at Canadian universities. This is an important distinction, as I would not consider online degrees granted by institutions in countries which have less stringent degree-granting requirements as being equivalent to online degrees earned at Canadian universities”.

Confident about Canadian education system, these participants considered online degrees granted by Canadian institutions as credible educational credentials.

The accreditation of programs and universities, credibility of institutions, and trust in the Canadian education system were indicators of credibility of online degrees for some participants. Perceptions of educational quality of online degrees influenced levels of acceptability of online degrees for other participants. The next section summarizes data related to perceptions of educational quality.
Educational Quality of Online Degrees

Participants had differing views about the quality of online degrees. Some employers in the study rated the educational quality of online degrees at the same level as, and in a few instances higher than, face-to-face degrees. However, other participants referred to online degrees as “no short of a scam” or “low-end degrees”. The following two themes were observed in the data related to perceptions of quality of online degrees, 1) reputation of an institution or a program was an indicator of the educational quality; 2) perceptions of educational effectiveness and educational experience of students indicated educational quality. Participants’ views on the educational quality of online degrees may influence their decisions related to hiring or promoting candidates with online degrees.

Institution and Program Reputation

The most reoccurring theme that emerged from the data was about the connection between the reputation of an institution or a program and the perception of educational quality. Some participants stated that the reputation of an institution would indicate educational quality regardless of the online versus campus-based modality of a degree. Others ranked online degrees at different educational quality levels based on the specific reputation of online programs or universities. One participant classified institutions offering online degrees into distinct groups and associated them with varied levels of educational quality. The following is a summary of opinions about educational quality of online degrees linked with reputation.

First, some participants stated that they considered the reputation of the university over the modality of educational delivery. For example, one stated, “Quality changes between institutions. I would not differentiate between learning modality, but by the
reputation of the university conferring the degree”. Another explained, “I tend to look for the institution reputation, not for the delivery mode”. To these participants reputation of the institution indicated quality of the degree regardless of online or campus-based modality. The more reputable the institution, the higher the perception of its educational quality, another participant argued,

“I think it is less about the online degree versus the face-to-face degree and more about the institution. For example, if an applicant had a degree from Queen's University and another had a degree from Athabasca University (online programs only) I would be more impressed with the Queen's degree because I know it is an extremely demanding school. On the other hand, an online degree or a face-to-face degree from a similarly ranked school would not pose a difference for me”.

Reputation is a social construct than a scientific measure. Based on socially constructed views about institutions, participants believed that online degrees granted by reputable institutions signified quality education.

Furthermore, a few respondents ranked online degrees based on the specific reputation of the online programs. For example, in response to the question related to general views about online degrees, a survey participant noted, “Depends on the university. Some [universities] are good and/or well-known for specific fields of studies; some others have less good reputation”. Another respondent explained, “Like face-to-face schools there are varying reputations with online degrees. If it is an established Canadian program with well-known online presence then I have trust in those online degrees”. The specific reputation of a program, therefore, indicated educational quality to the participants.
Additionally, one of the respondents classified Canadian institutions offering online programs into four distinct categories with varied levels of perceived educational quality. The categories were specified as established online only institutions, online institutions with residencies, conventional institutions with online degrees, and conventional institutions with reputable online degrees. Respondent explained that although he considered established Canadian online institutions slightly better than commercialized American institutions in terms of educational quality, he did not rank them much higher. He said, “Online institutions excessively advertise”. He added, “[…] In some ways they come across as a school that would give anyone a degree”. Next, he explained that he associated online institutions with physical presence and campus residencies of sufficient educational quality. Participant referred to the experience of one of his business clients who had taken an 18-month executive MBA that included a three-week campus residency at a Canadian institution. He followed that his client had found the residency experience a valuable educational and networking opportunity. Online education combined with campus experience, as opposed to strictly online, indicated an increased level of educational quality to the participant. The third group, according to the respondent, was only trying to expand their market and recruit more students beyond campus programming with “no other purpose built into their online programs,” respondent pointed. “Simply going online to add to existing markets and because others are doing it are not good enough reasons,” he concluded. Respondent believed these types of online programs offered no specific value or attraction and if he were to take an online program, he would not pursue them. The final category according to the participant consisted of institutions that have expanded access to their popular campus-
based programs to a wider audience through online education. He gave the example of Queen’s MBA, which he explained that he associated with one of the highest educational standards in Canada. This respondent categorized institutions offering online degrees and associated them with different levels of educational quality.

Overall, the findings indicated that the reputation of institutions or educational programs influenced some participants’ perceptions of educational quality of online degrees. To some the reputation of an institution would indicate educational quality regardless of the online versus campus-based modality. To others online degrees represented different educational quality levels based on the specific reputation of online programs or universities. Next, the findings related to educational effectiveness as an indicator of educational quality are discussed.

**Educational Effectiveness and Educational Experience**

Respondents expressed differing opinions about the educational quality of online degrees, as compared with face-to-face campus-based degrees based on perceptions of educational effectiveness and educational experience of students. Some participants attributed online degrees with low educational standards and expressed concerns over student evaluation. However, others regarded the educational effectiveness of online degrees at the same level as that of campus-based degrees. In few instances, respondents also ranked the quality of online education higher than classical campus-based learning. Differentiating between educational experience and educational effectiveness, some participants explained that although the achievement of academic outcomes could be similar in the campus-based and online environments, certain aspects of educational experience, such as social interaction and possibilities for networking, might be limited in
online education. Finally, some participants pointed that educational effectiveness and learning experience would be reliant on instructional design and delivery methods than the modality of education. Referring to sample excerpts, the following discussion provides details on the diversity of views on the subject.

**Educational effectiveness and standards.** Diverse views were evident in the data about the educational effectiveness of online degrees. Some participants referred to online degrees as “no short of a scam” or “low-end degrees”. Others rated the educational value of online degrees at the same level as, and in some instances higher than, face-to-face degrees. A few respondents described their personal experiences in online learning environments. The views ranged between highly negative to highly positive.

Firstly, some participants attributed low educational standards to online education and expressed concerns over academic integrity of online programs. To some online programs represented low admission criteria and served students who would not qualify to attend face-to-face campus based universities. A few others believed that online education was easier and less demanding. For example, a participant stated, “I would imagine they [online degrees] are easier to obtain and, therefore, less indicative of how "good" an applicant is”. Another respondent extended the perception of easiness to concerns over student evaluation, noting, “My thoughts are probably stereotypes related to online education. I think it is easier than face-to-face education and that people can pretend to have done the work when in reality it is not them”. Concerned with academic integrity another participant stated, “Initial thought is I don't trust it [online degree],
easier to fake results”. Although apprehensions over educational standards appeared in
the data, perceived inadequacies in other aspects of learning were also raised.

Some respondents expressed deficiencies in online education related to
experiential, scientific, and social learning. For example, a participant stated, “Usually
[online degrees are] less practical... online are low-end degrees compared to those where
you need to attend labs for example. It may be better than no degree”. Another explained,
“Probably just little short of a scam in most fields. No hands-on experimentation,
learning to use equipment, field trips, debate with other students/professors, exposure to
other departments on campus, etc.”. Although above views may be based on
assumptions, in the following example, a participant spoke from experience.

“Few years ago, I attended an online university. The problem with online
education is first of all most of them are very expensive, you have no interaction
face-to-face with your classmates, most of your qualification is based on papers
and writing. After one semester I dropped it, and went back to non- online
educational environment, where I can present myself better, learn more,
communicate, and learn more skills. What I learned there [online semester] was
nothing. They [online programs] focus just on paper, paper, and papers”.

In contrast with above participants who believed online education suffers from
deficiencies, other respondents expressed positive views related to the educational quality
of online degrees. For example, “I believe that many online degree programs offered by
Canadian universities can be equally compared to face-to-face programs”; “I consider
online learning just as effective as traditional classroom-based learning,” participants
stated. Where above participants referred to the effectiveness of online degrees in
general terms, others were specific about indicators of educational effectiveness such as academic rigour, and knowledge transfer. A participant, for instance, noted, “Online programs can be as rigorous (if they are the right program)”.

Another respondent explained, “[online degrees are] equal to campus based regarding knowledge transfer.” In addition to academic rigour and knowledge transfer, references to dialogic exchange and availability of resources were also made. A participant stated,

“I feel they [online degrees] can be very effective. Although the face-to-face discussion is missing, there can be very good exchanges through chat facilities in on-line programs. Although students do not have access to library facilities, there is certainly a lot of material that is, or can be placed on-line”.

In general or specific terms, a number of participants expressed that they considered the educational effectiveness of online degrees comparable to that of face-to-face degrees.

Although, above views could be based on assumptions, literature or media, some respondents described positive personal experiences in online learning environments. For example, a respondent stated,

“I completed an online degree myself, and realize the amount of work required to complete the requirements for the degree. In my area of work (learning technologies), I actually find those who have done the online degree to have better skills as they have used online technologies in their degree work. I don't really see a negative to doing online degrees, and I find the caliber of people doing one or the other to be equivalent, all things being equal”.

Another participant discussed interaction with instructors and students in online learning, and referred to his experiences in face-to-face and online education, stating,
“I have used online education myself and feel that university courses are set up with a solid component of interaction with the instructor and fellow students. It allows the student to fit courses and coursework into a busy schedule, often with full-time work and family obligations as well. Having attended in-person courses as well, I did not find any detriment with online-only benefits”.

Similarly, another participant stated, “The universities are accredited and accountable for the quality of the degree. I have two masters, one that I obtained through face-to-face study and one through online study, and I learned different things, equally valuable, from each”. Although some participants described positive experiences and views related to the educational quality of online degrees, others were concerned about the academic standards in online education.

**Educational experience.** As is educational effectiveness, related to the achievement of learning outcomes, a major aspect of education, so is educational experience pertaining to the interaction of students within the broader environment. A participant noted, “I think that the quality of education is the same [in online or campus-based]. Perhaps the experience is not the same […]”. According to some participants, aspects of educational experience such as interaction with peers and mentors, networking opportunities, collaboration, and the overall campus experience differed or were absent depending on the educational environment. For example, referring to networking opportunities, a respondent stated, “[An online student] misses out on networking opportunities, which I think are crucial to building connections”. Another participant referred to interactions in campus-based education given a fixed time and space structure to differ from an online environment,
“I think being on a campus requires you to be in a classroom, or requires you to be in a certain space and certain time. And, it forces certain interactions, whether it is with a professor or it is with peers, that you may not always get the same opportunities online. Not to say that there is not interaction online”.

Referring to the overall campus experience a participant stated,

“Some of the [online] courses provide unique experiences that on-campus programs may not be able to do - and the opposite is true as well, sometimes the "whole university experience" of campus life can be missing from an online program”.

These statements represent a sample of responses where the educational environment was perceived to influence educational experience. A respondent summed it up this way,

“If I am giving advice to a young adult who was making a decision whether to go to university in-person or online, is that there are elements of university education, or any education for that matter, that are not just strictly in the classroom or in the learning setting. There are other elements that are added depending on the environment you are in. So, it just depends on the person and their desire as to where they are going”.

A matter of design. In addition to educational experience and quality, participants discussed suitability of programs or disciplines for online delivery. Although to some participants certain disciplines did not lend themselves to online delivery, to others it was a matter of design to implement educational programs effectively. Some participants stated that disciplines such as the sciences might not lend themselves to an
online delivery model, in contrast, technology-driven programs, the arts and humanities could. For instance, a respondent stated,

“There are some degree programs that simply would not be as effective on-line, some of the sciences, for example, where a great deal of lab-work is required. I think online degrees can be much more effective for the Arts and Humanities”.

An employer noted, “Online degrees may be a better fit where the curriculum is more technology-driven, whereas magisterial learning might be better for more “traditional” curriculum”. Referring to disciplines where building connections is important, a participant pointed, “MBA's should be in-person to gain the valuable networking opportunities”. However, other participants explained that content of the curricula or aspects of the educational experience that cannot be included in an online environment could be integrated through a blended learning design. A respondent noted,

“I think socialization in a physical setting is important and we see that even now in our work-life that as barriers have been broken down and we are forced to meet with colleagues online or by phone, videoconference, etc., there is always this element that is brought to the table that is physical, that can't be captured in any other way [….] The ideal, I think is to have a bit of both [campus experience and online education]. That is my personal view. I am a blended thinker so I would say that I like traditional things, but I also embrace new ones, and consider the benefits of them”.

Another participant noted, “My preference would be to provide a blended learning approach to education, group work, individual work, a residential component, examination, peer review”. Overall, although some participants believed that curricula or
aspects of the educational experience that could not be included in an online environment could be integrated through a blended learning approach, some others believed that certain disciplines might not lend themselves to online delivery.

**Affordances and Constraints of Online Education**

Participants perceived both affordances and constraints in online education. Respondents frequently referred to access, control, and flexibility as affordances of online education, particularly benefiting adult learners with professional and family responsibilities or students in remote areas. For example a participant stated,

“I believe that's [online education] a great way to get a degree for several reasons: Give a chance for motivated persons to study and specialize. The person can manage his/her personal time efficiently between studying and personal life. This gives a great opportunity for single parents and/or parents with kids, [...] people with limited budget (study and work at the same time), [and] people living in remote areas (far from school and universities) [...]”.

Other comments included, “[...] I am aware that some of the people we most need in workplaces, such as mature workers or members of marginalized groups, will find online education more accessible”; “[...] Personally, my job requires lot of travel and an online degree will suit me very well. Last year, I cancelled two classes because of some emergency work travel that I had to do”.

Participants also mentioned that online education could offer opportunities for students with certain personalities or special needs to learn more effectively. One stated, “[...] For example, if you are attending the class [face-to-face], you might not be able to ask or answer questions as comfortably. I think there are some social
factors that are taken out of the equation that would make people more comfortable in an online environment to ask questions or answer questions. I think people who are a little on the shy or reserved side might do better in an online program where they don't have to be surrounded by 50 other people in the classroom […]”.

Another participant added, “Great opportunity for people who are not comfortable to study in a classroom especially a person with ADHD”. In these instances, online education was perceived to offer a more comfortable learning environment for students with certain personalities or disabilities.

However, participants also perceived limitations in online education. For example, an interview respondent stated that an online learning environment could not offer a recent high school graduate entering university the same advantages that a campus experience could. Participant referred to aspects such as community participation, mentorship, and building strong relationships with peers or faculty that would be limited or absent from an online learning environment. Describing her personal experiences, participant added that she enjoyed direct access to faculty by visiting their office and discussing questions with them, something she believed would be unavailable in online education. Another interview respondent observed that the flexibility and openness of online learning environments could be problematic for preparing young adults for structured work environments. She stated,

“My small view of the world is that life is full of opportunities and it is also full of challenges. And the challenges are often with other people…. We sometimes have to find a way to work with a structure and within a model whether we like it or
not - because that is [what] life is about…. The traditional university setting I think offers many young people [a structure] and especially now young people are more comfortable, I think, in a virtual world than they are in a physical world. The nature of technology has changed drastically in the past twenty years. When I went to university, … it was DOS or Unix and the screen and commands. Now, you have video, you have instant real-time communication. The world has totally changed, which is wonderful. It allows for new opportunities like it breaks down the physical barriers, but at the same time the boundaries are a little bit blurred and there is less structure, which is good, but then there are times when structure exists whether you like it or not and you have to learn to work with it.

I have seen with the younger generation, and I am not that old [39 years of age], that there is a lack of... maybe lack of respect of authority is the wrong word, but there is an element that people don't recognize that in any institution, whether it is an educational one or it is a work environment or maybe it is more broad and it is government or global, there is always an authority figure where people have to defer to. As technology has broken physical barriers, I think younger people entering the workforce have less regard for the institution and structure and more regard for themselves - an online world is very self-driven, self-engaged, self-aware”.

According to the respondent, traditional face-to-face educational environments create the conditions for students to be exposed to a structure and authority figures and prepare for structured work environments. On the contrary, according to the participant, in online
education the flexibility of the environment and physical distance from others would emphasize focus on self and understate regard for structure and authority figures.

In general, participants referred to both affordances and constraints of online education. Access, flexibility, and control were amongst the perceived affordances of online education, particularly benefiting adult learners with professional and family responsibilities, remote learners, and students with special needs. As to the constraints of online education, two main elements were raised. An interview respondent referred to the absence of campus experience as a limitation for younger students to develop skills beyond the teaching curricula. Another interview respondent discussed that the flexibility and openness of online education could understate regard for authorities and structure and could be problematic for organizations when the young adults enter the workforce.

**Stated Gaps in Awareness**

Some employers stated that they were unfamiliar with online degrees and online educational experience. For example a respondent stated, “I don't know enough about them [online degrees], and what differs from an in person experience”. A second noted, “I actually know very little about them [online degrees] so I have next to no thoughts”. A third questioned, “I wonder how online degrees deal with interactive competencies”. These statements imply an informational gap about online education. A recommendation for the graduates and participants of online degrees, therefore, may be to engage in dialogue with prospective employers and recruiters and describe their educational experience. As well, there may be a role for the institutions to provide information about online education to employers.
Summary

In this chapter, I provided a thematic analysis of qualitative findings. Responses to the open-ended survey question related to employers’ general views about online degrees offered by Canadian universities and data from the four semi-structured interviews were cumulatively analyzed to identify emergent themes related to the research question: How do Canadian employers view online degrees from Canadian institutions as credentials for employment? Four main themes, those of credibility of online degrees, educational quality of online degrees, affordances and constraints of online education, and stated gaps in awareness emerged from the data. Related to credibility of online degrees some respondents expressed trust in the Canadian institutions granting credentials. Others referred to official accreditation of programs or universities as indicators of educational credibility. A number of respondents also explained that the reputation of programs or institutions were elements they considered in evaluating educational credentials. Related to educational quality of online degrees, two sub-themes emerged, educational effectiveness and educational experience. Participants expressed diverse views about educational effectiveness of online degrees. Some participants attributed online degrees with low educational standards and expressed concerns over student evaluation. However, others regarded the educational effectiveness of online degrees at the same level as that of campus-based degrees. Related to educational experience, a number of participants referred to various aspects of educational experience, such as collaboration, networking, and socialization, noting that depending on the educational environment, the educational experience would differ. Some participants also referred to a blended learning approach to merge the benefits of
both online and campus-based education. References to affordances and constraints of online education were observed in the data. Participants referred to access, flexibility, and control as affordances of online education, and absence of campus experience and flexibility of structure as constraints in online learning environments. Finally, some respondents expressed that they were unfamiliar with online education and wondered how online learning dealt with interactive competencies. The analysis summarized the views of Canadian employers participating in this study about online degrees from Canadian institutions, highlighting factors that participants considered in evaluating online degrees as credentials for employment.
Chapter Six: Discussion

Three theories influenced this study, power elite, social stratification, and technological determinism. In this chapter, a discussion of the findings related to these theories follows. The term “employers”, in the discussion, refers to Canadian employers who participated in this study.

Power Elite

Based on the perspective that powerful groups in the society control access to economic systems (Chomsky, 2012; Mills, 1956), this study focused on studying Canadian employers’ views about online degrees as credentials for employment. The findings indicate three key points. First, approximately 75% of employers considered online degrees equivalent to campus-based degrees in the hypothetical hiring situation and over 90% of them viewed online degrees similar to campus-based degrees in the hypothetical employment promotion situation. This signifies a high level of neutrality towards online degrees by employers in this study. Second, the findings indicate that about 25% of employers considered campus-based education superior to online degrees in hiring situations. This implies that in one in four cases an online degree may pose a barrier to entry in the labour economy. Third, the employers were more neutral towards online degrees in employment promotion situations than they were in hiring. Over 90% of study participants viewed online degrees similar to campus-based degrees in the hypothetical job promotion situation, as compared with 75% of them who stated neutrality towards online degrees in the hypothetical hiring scenario. Although, these findings are not generalizable, they point to neutrality of employers towards online degrees in employment situations.
Social Stratification

One of the most reoccurring themes that emerged from the data was about the connection between the reputation of an institution and the perceptions of quality of degrees and graduates by the institution, which related to social stratification (Weber, 1954). A number of participants referred to specific institutions and their graduates with high regard, irrespective of the degrees to be online or conventional. Others mentioned reputable institutions in general terms to denote a higher status for credentials granted by them. Reputable institutions were perceived to produce qualified graduates and less reputable institutions were perceived to produce less qualified graduates. The relative social statuses of graduates depending on the institution they graduated from indicated their relative status, which imply social stratification.

Positivist Technological Determinism

The findings of this study were examined through the lens of positivist technological determinism theory. Positivist technological determinism posits that technology plays an enabling role in providing access to education, and subsequently advancement within the society (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). To assess the link between online degrees and employment acquisition and advancement potentials, this study examined Canadian employers’ perceptions of online degrees in hiring and promotion scenarios. The findings generally support positivist technological determinism in that 75% of employers perceived online degrees equivalent to campus-based degrees for hiring and over 90% considered online degrees equal to campus-based degrees in employment promotion scenarios. Based on these findings, education through technology
presents positive potentials for employment opportunities for the graduates and it can play an enabling role.

Summary

In this section, the findings of the study were discussed in relevance with power elite, social stratification, and positivist technological determinism. Based on the view that employers control access to the economic systems, the findings pointed to three elements. First, that majority of employers in this study considered online degrees equivalent to campus-based degrees in the hypothetical scenarios. Second, about 25% of employers in this study considered campus-based education superior to online degrees in hiring situations. Third, the employers were more neutral towards online degrees in employment promotion situations than they were in hiring. In relevance with social stratification theory, the findings indicated that participants ranked some institutions and their graduates higher than others. Related to positivist technological determinism, the findings suggested that education through technology could present positive potentials for employment for the graduates - with respectively 75% and 90% of employers in this study neutral towards online degrees in hiring and employment promotion scenarios.
Chapter Eight: Conclusion

I set out to explore the views of Canadian employers on online bachelor’s degrees granted by Canadian institutions as credentials for employment. With predictions that online education participation at post-secondary level is on the rise (Industry Canada, 2011, CVU, 2012), and, an increased number of graduates with online degrees will seek employment or employment advancement in the labour market, this study sought to respond to the following question.

How do Canadian employers view online bachelor’s degrees from accredited Canadian universities as credentials for employment when hiring and promoting employees?

Three sub-questions followed.

1. In what ways does the educational delivery modality, primarily online or primarily face-to-face, affect the chances a job seeker has of getting hired or promoted in Canada?
2. How do employers compare degrees completed in a primarily face-to-face environment with degrees completed in a primarily online environment?
3. How do exposure and experience of an employer with online education influence their perceptions of online degrees?

The findings of four interviews and 84 surveys indicated that employers in this study were generally neutral towards online degrees in hiring situations. About 3 of 4 of interview respondents and 75% of survey respondents expressed no preference in the hiring situation between the applicant with an online degree and the applicant with
a campus-based degree, when all other factors such as experience and age were equal. However, about 20% of survey respondents and 1 of 4 of interview participants stated a preference for campus-based degrees in the hiring scenario. This indicated that one in four participants favoured the graduate with campus-based education over the person with online learning.

In relevance with the job promotion scenario an increased level of indifference toward modality of degrees was observed. All interview participants and 93% of survey respondents indicated that an online degree versus campus-based degree would receive equal level of consideration. Some interview participants explained that educational credentials were screening criteria in hiring; however, once an employee was hired, their performance and experience would be important factors in employment promotion. Explanatory data were not gathered in the survey related to the employment promotion. Findings are, therefore, inconclusive as to whether education or its modality is a criterion for consideration in employment scenarios. Further studies may clarify the issue.

Related to comparisons of online and campus-based degrees, diverse views emerged from the qualitative data on educational effectiveness. Some participants attributed online degrees with low educational standards and expressed concerns over student evaluation, similar to American studies (Adams, Lee & Cortese, 2012; Seibold, 2007). Others, however, stated that they regarded the educational effectiveness of online degrees at the same level as that of campus-based degrees. Views on educational effectiveness of online degrees varied.
Similarly, qualitative responses indicated mixed views related to educational experience. A number of participants referred to various aspects of educational experience, such as collaboration, networking, socialization and scientific lab experience to be absent or limited in an online environment. Others stated that they believed online education included collaborative activities, discussions, and means for socialization. Others stated that depending on the educational environment, educational experience would differ.

Pertaining to exposure and experience with online learning and views about online degrees three elements were observed. First, the level of participation in online university courses was higher by 13% amongst the category of participants with neutral views in the hiring scenario than the category of participants who preferred to hire the applicant with a campus-based degree. Second, two participants with stated negative experiences in online education at university level indicated a preference for campus-based degrees in the hiring scenario. Third, three survey participants who provided detailed explanations about personal positive experiences with online education at university or graduate level also expressed positive views about online degrees and selected the neutral option in the hiring scenario.

**Implications of the Study**

The findings of this study hold a number of implications for graduates and current participants of online degrees, prospective participants of online education, and institutions offering online degrees. Generally, these implications are positive. However, areas to engage in dialogue and awareness are also identified.
Implications for Graduates and Current Participants of Online Degrees

The findings of this study generally indicate positive implications for graduates of online degrees from Canadian institutions; however, they also point to some areas of concern. The majority of employers in this study considered online degrees granted by Canadian institutions as credible as campus-based degrees for employment purposes. A number of qualitative responses indicated trust in the Canadian education system and online degrees offered by Canadian institutions. However, some participants perceived that online education presented less academic rigour and opportunities for social interaction and teamwork. Some employers also expressed a lack of awareness of online education environments. A recommendation for the graduates and participants of online degrees, therefore, may be to engage in dialogue with prospective employers and recruiters and describe their educational experience to address any possible concerns.

Implications for Prospective Participants of Online Education

The findings of this study present two main implications for the prospective students of online education. First, the majority of employers in this study considered online degrees equivalent to campus-based degrees in the hypothetical employment scenarios. This suggests that an online degree may not be a barrier for entry or advancement within the labour economy. Second, participants frequently referred to perceptions of suitability of online education for adult learners with professional and family responsibilities and learners in remote areas or with special learning needs, based on perceptions of flexibility in online education environments. Perceptions of flexibility are consistent with literature on the subject (Anderson, 2008) that online degrees may offer flexibility over campus-based education for learners depending on their
circumstances and lifestyles. These findings indicate positive implications for prospective students of online education.

**Implications for Institutions Offering Online Degrees**

The results of this study point to three main implications for institutions offering online degrees. First, about 75% of participants in this study considered online degrees equivalent to campus-based education in hiring scenarios and indicated trust in the Canadian universities offering online degrees. This is good news for institutions offering online degrees. Second, some participants raised concerns related to the academic rigour, and exams and evaluation standards in online education. Third, some participants explicitly stated that they did not have adequate knowledge of online educational environments and the type of educational experience they entail. These suggest a role for the institutions in furthering awareness about online education and in addressing concerns.

**Recommendations for Future Studies**

This study investigated the views of a convenient sample of 87 Canadian employers across public, private, and social sectors on online degrees granted by Canadian universities using mixed methods methodology. Three compromises were inherent in the design of this study that had an implication on the findings. First, the findings through convenient sampling are not generalizable. Second, perceptions as opposed to actual practices of hiring and promoting employees were examined in this study. Third, the graduates’ experience was not represented as the study focused on the views of employers. Furthermore, although the findings related to the employment
promotion scenario indicated a high level of neutrality or indifference towards online degrees, they were inconclusive as to whether educational credentials present a significant factor for consideration in employment promotion situations. Based on these observations, the following is recommended for future studies:

1. To study a representative sample of employers for generalizable results
2. To investigate actual hiring practices as opposed to perceptions of employers
3. To explore graduates’ experiences in the labour economy and their employment status change
4. To evaluate the importance of educational credentials in employment promotion situations

**Conclusion**

This study investigated Canadian employers’ views on online degrees offered by Canadian institutions in hiring and promotion situations. With employment or career advancement a goal for many who pursue post-secondary education (Galt, 2010), the findings of this study serve as a source of information for current and prospective students, and graduates of online education. The findings are also relevant to institutions offering online education to address expressed concerns related to online degrees.
References and Bibliography


Statistics Canada (2008). *Proportion of Canadian education program participants aged 18 to 64 who used distance education, by age group.* Retrieved from http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-595-m/2009079/c-g/c-g1.2-eng.htm


Veletsianos, George (Ed.). (2010). *Emerging Technologies in Distance Education.* Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press.


Appendix A: Consent Forms

Paper Format Informed Consent for In-person Interviews

Study Name: An Investigation of Canadian Employers’ Views on Online Degrees

Principal Investigator: [Name], Graduate Student, School of Education and Technology, Royal Roads University, [Email].

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this academic study is to investigate the views of Canadian employers related to online degrees from Canadian institutions.

Your Role: You will be asked to respond to a number of questions in this interview, which will take you about 30 to 45 minutes to complete.

Risks and Discomforts: We do not foresee any risks or discomforts to you for your participation in the research. However, if you find any questions uncomfortable, please inform the researcher and do not answer.

Benefits of the Study and Benefits to You: The benefits of this study includes providing information related to value of education to post-secondary students and graduates as well as the post-secondary institutions. The benefit to you is that you can receive the summary of the findings.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. Your decision not to participate will not influence the nature of your relationship with Royal Roads University now, or in the future.

Withdrawal from the Study: You can withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions will not affect your relationship with the researcher, or Royal Roads University. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible unless you choose to allow us to keep your responses.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: All information you supply during the study will be held in confidence. Your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. The interview will be recorded and stored as a digital file on a password-protected USB key. The file will not have your name as the file name or in the audio recording. Only research staff will have access to your file. The audio file will only be kept for a maximum of six months from the date of the interview for data analysis purposes. The file will be deleted after data analysis. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. Any identifiable information will be masked or removed from the study.
**Dissemination:** The findings for this study will be published online on Royal Roads University website. You can also provide us with your email address should you choose to receive the findings via email.

**Questions about the Research?** If you have questions about this study or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact [Names, email and phone numbers].

This study has been reviewed and approved by Royal University’s Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact [Name, email and phone number].

**Legal Rights and Signatures:**

I, *(fill in your name here)*, consent to participate in the study titled, “An Investigation of Canadian Employers’ Views on Online Degrees” conducted by [Student Name]. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

**Signature** __________________________ **Date** __________________________
Participant

**Signature** __________________________ **Date** __________________________
Principal Investigator
Electronic Consent for e-Interviews

Study Name: An Investigation of Canadian Employers’ Views on Online Degrees

Principal Investigator: [Name], Graduate Student, School of Education and Technology, Royal Roads University, [Email].

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this academic study is to investigate the views of Canadian employers related to online degrees from Canadian institutions.

Your Role: You will be asked to respond to [to specify the number] questions in this interview, which will take you about 30 to 45 minutes to complete.

Risks and Discomforts: We do not foresee any risks or discomforts to you from your participation in the research. However, if you find any questions uncomfortable, please inform the researcher and don’t answer.

Benefits of the Study and Benefits to You: The benefits of this study includes providing information related to value of education to post-secondary students and graduates as well as the post-secondary institutions. The benefit to you is that you can receive the summary of the findings.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. Your decision not to participate will not influence the nature of your relationship with Royal Roads University now, or in the future.

Withdrawal from the Study: You can withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions will not affect your relationship with the researcher, or Royal Roads University. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: All information you supply during the study will be held in confidence. Your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. The interview will be recorded and stored as a digital file on a password-protected USB key. The file will not have your name as the file name or in the audio recording. Only research staff will have access to your file. The audio file will only be kept for a maximum of six months from the date of the interview for data analysis purposes. The file will be deleted after data analysis. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. Any identifiable information will be masked or removed from the study.

Dissemination: The findings for this study will be published online on Royal Roads University website. You can also provide us with your email address should you choose to receive the findings via email.
Questions About the Research? If you have questions about this study or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact [Names, email addresses, phone numbers].

This study has been reviewed and approved by Royal University’s Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact [Name, email address, phone number].

Agreement:

- I consent to participate in the study titled “An Investigation of Canadian Employers’ Views on Online Degrees” conducted by [Student Name] at Royal Roads University. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by completing this form. This indicates my consent.

  [Mandatory fields]
  First Name: ______________
  Last Name: ______________
  Date: ______________

- I do not consent to participate in this study.
Appendix B: Interview Instrument

Participation in Survey:

1. Have you recently participated in a survey related to online degrees?

[Now, let’s get the demographic questions out of the way.]

Demographic Questions:

Age:

1. Do you mind telling me your year of birth?

Sex:

2. Note the sex of the participant.

Education:

[Ask the questions without the answer options, but circle the option closet to participant’s answer]

3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
   
   a) No high school diploma
   b) High school diploma
   c) Some post-secondary
   d) College or trade certificate
   e) College diploma
   f) University degree (BA, BSc., BA (Hons.) etc.)
g) Professional degree (LLB., MD, BEd., BEng. BArch., BCom. etc.)

h) Graduate degree (MA, MSc. MBA, etc.)

i) Professional designation (CA, CMA, CGA, etc.)

j) Doctorate

k) Other. Please specify _______

4. In which year did you complete your highest level of education?

5. In which country did you receive your highest level of education?

Job Title/Category:

[Ask the questions without the answer options, but circle the option closest to participant’s answer]

6. What is your current job title?

a) HR Assistant

b) Staffing Officer

c) Recruitment Officer

d) HR Manager

e) Supervisor

f) Manager

g) Team lead

h) Director
i) Director General

j) Chief Executive Officer

k) Other. Please specify ______

Field of Work:

7. What is your specific field of work? [eg. Human Resources, Strategic Policy, Teaching, etc.]

Sector:

[Ask the questions without the answer options, but circle the option closet to participant’s answer]

8. In which sector are you employed?

   a) Public

   b) Private

   c) Volunteer/Social

Organization:

[Ask the questions without the answer options, but circle the option closet to participant’s answer]

9. How large is the organization you work for?

   a) 50 staff or less
b) 50 - 100 staff

c) 101 - 500 staff

d) 501 - 1,000 staff

e) 1,001 - 5,000 staff

f) 5,001 - 10,000 staff

g) 10,001 - 20,000 staff

h) 20,001 +

Province or Territory of Work:

10. In which province or territory do you work?

a) Alberta

b) British Columbia

c) Manitoba

d) New Brunswick

e) Newfoundland and Labrador

f) Northwest Territories

g) Nova Scotia

h) Nunavut

i) Ontario

j) Prince Edward Island (P.E.I)

k) Quebec

l) Saskatchewan

m) Yukon
Home Population Center:

11. What is the approximate population of the place [town, city, municipality, etc.] where you live?

   a) Less than 1,000
   b) 1,000 to 29,999
   c) 30,000 to 99,999
   d) 100,000 and over

[Thank you for responding to the demographic questions. We will move to the interview questions.]

12. Have you been involved in hiring employees for your organization in the past five years? Involvement means any of the following:

   o Reviewing resumes/CVs/applications to eliminate or include applicants as possible candidates
   o Short-listing for interviews
   o Short-listing for examinations or tests
   o Interviewing
   o Marking examinations or tests
   o Making recommendations on hiring a candidate
   o Making a final decision on hiring a candidate
a) Yes [Proceed to Question 13]

b) No [Proceed to Interview Question 1]

c) I don’t remember [Proceed to Question 13]

13. Over the past five years, which of these hiring activities have you been involved in? [Checkbox questions. More than one answer is possible.]

☐ reviewing resumes/applications to eliminate or include as possible candidates

☐ short-listing for interviews

☐ short-listing for examinations or tests

☐ interviewing

☐ marking examinations or tests

☐ making recommendations on hiring a candidate

☐ making a final decision on hiring a candidate

**Interview Questions:**

[I will describe some scenarios and ask you questions]

**The first scenario is related to a hiring situation.**

1. **Scenario 1:** You have two applicants, both 25 years of age, graduated from the same high school in Canada, worked at the same job for the same company for past two years. They both have a bachelor’s degree in [insert related field depending on the employer’s area]. Applicant A has an online degree from a Canadian university. Applicant B has completed his or her degree on campus at another Canadian university. Which of the two would you hire? [Why?] [Would it make any difference if portion of studies was completed on campus?]
The second scenario is related to promoting an employee within your organization.

2. **Scenario 2:** You have the opportunity to promote one of two employees in your team. The two employees are the same age, have worked for you for the same number of years, held exactly the same positions, and performed their duties equally well. They both have a bachelor’s degree in *[insert related field depending on the employer’s area]*. Applicant A completed his/her degree **online** at a Canadian university. Applicant B completed his/her degree **through on-campus studies** at another Canadian university. Which of the two would you promote? [Why?] [Would it make any difference if portion of studies was completed on campus?]

3. Have you ever hired anyone with an online bachelor’s degree? [Someone who completed a degree from Athabasca University or TÉLUQ, Télé université du Québec, for example?]
   1. [If yes, how was that experience? If no, why not?]
   2. [How would you know if a person’s degree was completed online?]
   3. [How about applications received from applicants with online or bachelor’s degree? What if you get applications for such applicants in the future?]

4. If you were to start your post-secondary education [all over again], would you consider an online degree? [Why or why not?]

5. Do you know anyone who has got an online or distance degree?
   1. [What do you know about their online education experience?]
2. [Would you say knowing that individual(s) who completed their degree online have had any influence over your views about online education?]

6. Have you taken any online courses or programs yourself or may be taking in the future?
   1. [What attracted you to taking an online course?]
   2. [How did you find the experience?]
   3. [What do you think the experience will be like?]

7. Anything else you would like to share with me regarding online degrees?

Results

1. Would you like to receive the results of this study?
   a. Yes
   b. No

   [If yes] Which email address should we use to send you the results of this study?

[Thank you for your time today and sharing your experiences and thoughts with us. You have our contact. Please contact us if you have any questions.]
Appendix C: Survey Instrument

[Introduction Page]

Thank you for accepting the invitation to participate in a short online survey about online degrees. The principal investigator for this study is Fatima Bahir at Royal Roads University.

By participating in this survey, you will help us evaluate aspects of education in Canada, advance knowledge in the area, and help students and prospective students make decisions related to their education.

The survey should take between 3 to 10 minutes to complete. Your responses are anonymous and your participation is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the survey.

Please press “Submit” on the last page of the survey to confirm your participation in this survey. If you decide not to “Submit”, we will discard the incomplete responses and consider you withdrew from the study.

Any Questions? If you have questions about the study or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact [Names, emails, phone numbers].

This research has been reviewed and approved by Royal University’s Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact [Name, email address, phone number].

Thank you for your participation.
Survey Questions

[Qualifying]

Select the statement that best represents your situation.

Over the past five years...

- I have been involved in hiring new employees for a Canadian organization.
  
  [Proceed]

- I have been involved in promoting employees within a Canadian organization.
  
  [ Proceed]

- Both.
  
  [Proceed]

- Neither.
  
  [Exit]

Involvement means:

- Reviewing resumes/CVs/applications to include or exclude applicants as possible candidates
- Short-listing for interviews
- Short-listing for examinations or tests
- Interviewing
- Marking examinations or tests
- Making recommendations on hiring a candidate
- Making a final decision on hiring a candidate
- Making recommendations on promoting a candidate
- Making a final decision on promoting a candidate
The following question relates to hiring situations.

1. You have one vacancy to fill and two applicants. One applicant has a degree from a Canadian University for studies completed through online education and the other has a degree obtained through face-to-face on-campus education from another Canadian university. Which applicant would you hire?
   a. I would hire the applicant with the online degree.
   b. I would hire the applicant with the degree obtained through face-to-face campus education.
   c. I don't have any specific preference of one over the other.
   d. Other - Please specify:

   [If “a” is selected, ask follow up]
   • Why would you prefer to hire the applicant with an online degree?

   [If “b” is selected, ask follow up]
   • Why would you prefer to hire the applicant with face-to-face on campus degree?

The following question relates to job promotions.

2. You have the opportunity to promote one of two employees in your team. All other factors are equal except one employee has a degree completed through online education from a Canadian university and the other has a degree completed through face-to-face campus education from a Canadian university. Which employee would you promote?
   a. Employee with online degree.
b. Employee with face-to-face campus-based degree.

c. I don't have any specific preference of one over the other.

d. Other - Please specify:

[If “a” is selected, ask follow up]

- Why would you prefer to promote the employee with online degree?

[If “b” is selected, ask follow up]

- Why would you prefer to promote the employee with face-to-face on-campus degree?

The following question relates to general views on online degrees.

3. What are your thoughts on online bachelor’s degrees offered by Canadian universities?

[Demographic Questions]

Age:

1. In which year were you born? [YYYY]

Sex:

2. What is your sex?

   a) Male

   b) Female

   c) Other

Education:

3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

   1) Without high school diploma
m) High school diploma
n) Some post-secondary
o) College or trade certificate
p) College diploma
q) University degree (BA, BSc., BA (Hons.) etc.)
r) Professional degree (LLB., MD, BEd., BEng. B.Arch., BCom. etc.)
s) Graduate degree (MA, MSc. MBA, etc.)
t) Professional designation (CA, CMA, CGA, etc.)

u) Doctorate
v) Other. Please specify _______

4. In which year did you complete your highest level of education? [YYYY]

5. Have you ever taken any online courses as part of your education, training, or career development?
   a) Yes
   b) No
   c) I don’t remember

   [If yes is selected, ask follow up.]

   5.1 What kind of online courses or programs did you take?

   Job Title/Category:

6. What is your current job title?

   l) HR Assistant
m) Staffing Officer

n) Recruitment Officer

o) HR Manager

p) Supervisor

q) Manager

r) Team lead

s) Director

t) Director General

u) Chief Executive Officer

v) Other. Please specify _______

**Sector:**

7. In which sector do you work?

   a) Public

   b) Private

   c) Voluntary/Social

**Organization:**

8. How large is the organization you work for?

   i) 50 staff or less
j) 51 to 100 staff
k) 101 - 500 staff
l) 501 - 1,000 staff
m) 1,001 - 5,000 staff
n) 5,001 - 10,000 staff
o) 10,001 - 20,000 staff
p) 20,001 +

Province or Territory of Work:

9. In which province or territory do you work?

n) Alberta
o) British Columbia
p) Manitoba
q) New Brunswick
r) Newfoundland and Labrador
s) Northwest Territories
t) Nova Scotia
u) Nunavut
v) Ontario
w) Prince Edward Island (P.E.I)
x) Quebec
y) Saskatchewan
z) Yukon
Home Population Center:

10. What is the approximate population of the place [town, city, municipality, etc.] where you live?

   a) Less than 1,000
   b) 1,000 to 29,999
   c) 30,000 to 99,999
   d) 100,000 and over

Participation in Interview:

11. Were you interviewed by Fatima Bahir from Royal Roads University recently related to online degrees?

   a) Yes
   b) No
   c) I don’t remember

[Results]

1. Are you interested to receive the results of this study?
   a. Yes
   b. No

   [If yes, ask follow-up]

   Which email address should we use to send you the results of this study?

[Closing Page]

Thank you for taking the time to respond to this survey. Please press “Submit” to confirm your participation and complete this survey.

If you have questions about the study, please feel free to contact [Names, email addresses].
This research has been reviewed and approved by Royal University’s Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines.

If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact [Name, email address, phone number].