

# Adjunct Faculty Members' Perceptions of Online Education Compared to Traditional Education

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## Abstract

Due to the growth of online courses and universities, the quality and benefits of distance education warrant scholarly attention. Previous researchers have focused on students', employers', and traditional professors' perspectives of online courses. Although adjunct professors teach the majority of online courses, few researchers have explored their opinions of online education compared to traditional, face-to-face education. Also lacking is information about online instructors' perceptions of the online teaching position. The purpose of this report was to present online adjunct faculty members' perceptions of online education in relation to traditional education. Sixty-eight adjunct faculty members who were recruited through LinkedIn voluntarily completed an instrument that was developed for this purpose. Given that this report represents an initial attempt to understand this phenomenon, preliminary results are reported as descriptive statistics. Overall, the online adjunct faculty members held favorable opinions of online education and believed that others did as well. Although they reported grading similarly in online courses as in traditional courses, the online adjunct faculty members reported that students thought that online professors graded more easily. Limitations and recommendations for future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* online; traditional; education; adjunct; faculty

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As access to online courses continues to grow (Mayadas, Bourne, & Bacsich, 2009), researchers have focused their attention on perceptions of online education, especially among

students (e.g., Simon, Jackson, & Maxwell, 2014) and employers (e.g., Adams & Defleur, 2006). It is possible that online faculty members might offer a different perspective of online learning than

students and employers. Wilkes, Simon, and Brooks (2006) asked business professors who taught traditional courses to report their perceptions of online courses. Although the majority of them stated that they would consider teaching online, they had concerns about quality. Wilkes et al. also found that traditional students had more positive perceptions of online education than professors. Thornton (2013) reported that faculty members' greatest concerns about online education involved the social and communicative interactions in addition to pedagogical issues. Nevertheless, Fillion, Limayem, Laferriere, and Mantha (2008) found that onsite education was no more effective than online education. Furthermore, they reported that online students were more satisfied than those at traditional institutions.

In their attempt to determine if students' success rates were different in online courses versus traditional courses, Wilson and Allen (2010) found that the delivery method was less important than the quality of the contact received from the instructor. In terms of pedagogy, online courses may be updated easily, which makes them flexible (Reid, 2012). The ability to keep courses

current and relevant may impact the quality of the material and the ability of faculty members to deliver what they consider to be useful information.

Although some opponents to online education worry about how actively responsive online faculty members can be, Otter et al. (2013) found that they made themselves more available to their students than faculty members at traditional institutions. McCann and Holt (2009) argued that online faculty members were accessible and less stressed than faculty members at traditional brick-and-mortar institutions. Furthermore, Otter et al. stated that online faculty members did not believe that they were weaker or less qualified than faculty members who taught traditional courses. Meyer (2012) found that faculty members who taught online courses had more time to spend on other activities, such as research.

Despite the existence of this literature on perceptions of online education, research on online faculty members' perceptions is scant (McLawhon & Cutright, 2012). In particular, research on adjunct faculty members' opinions of how online education compares to traditional

education is lacking. Such research is relevant and timely, as many people consider traditional education to be the standard by which online education should be evaluated. Furthermore, the perceptions of online faculty members may provide some insight into the quality of online education. Reid (2012) argued that it is important to understand faculty members' perceptions because they can impact both how they handle innovative change in education and how successful students are. Similarly, Meyer and McNeal (2011) contended that online faculty members can help to contribute to the discussion about how to be advocates of innovation.

### **Method**

The purpose of this report was to present online adjunct faculty members' perceptions of online education in relation to traditional education. To achieve this purpose, a 12-item instrument developed using SurveyMonkey was made available in a LinkedIn group of online adjunct professors. Two of the items were demographic in nature and were used to obtain information about participants' sex and years of experience teaching online. The remaining items included multiple-choice responses to items about

respondents' preferences and perceptions of online education as compared to traditional education.

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited from a LinkedIn group of online adjunct professors, a forum where discussion of online issues freely occurred. Due to their educational credentials and voluntary group membership, it was assumed that these faculty members had taught or taken at least one course in both an online and a traditional brick-and-mortar setting. Although it can be difficult to determine the actual number of active members in a LinkedIn group, the selected group apparently had 963 members. However, based on responses within the group, many of the members did not participate on a regular basis. From these 963 members, 68 submitted responses. Of the respondents, 40 (59%) were female. In terms of online teaching experience, 13 (19%) had fewer than 3 years, 27 (40%) had 3 to 8 years, and 28 (41%) had more than 8 years.

### **Materials**

For the purposes of this report, a 12-item instrument was created. Items were designed to assess participants' perceptions of online learning,

including their opinions of online education versus traditional education in terms of quality and pay as well as grading. Participants rated their perceptions of online education on each of these items as inferior, superior, or the same as traditional education. Then, they provided reports on how they believed students and employers perceive online education as compared to traditional education. Finally, participants indicated what they perceived as the best and the worst part of teaching online courses from structured responses, including pay, time required, perceptions of others, and interaction with students. The instrument was pilot tested with adjunct online professors before being posted in the LinkedIn group as recommended by Radhakrishna (2007).

### **Procedure**

The instrument was posted in the LinkedIn group with a note asking members to participate in a brief survey of their opinions of online education. The instructions included the requirement that they provide a name (real or otherwise) to acknowledge that they read the consent form; however, their data were assigned numbers to maintain anonymity. Several attempts

were made to obtain responses; however, due to the nature of LinkedIn groups, not all members access them on a regular basis. Email requests were sent to group members in addition to the posted requests. After several weeks of no additional responses based on these attempts, a total of 68 responses were included in the analyses.

## **Results**

### **Quality of Curriculum**

The majority (66%) of participants reported that online curricula were similar in quality to traditional curricula; however, 14% believed that online curricula were superior. In addition, the majority (68%) of participants indicated that they believed that employers thought that online curricula were inferior to traditional curricula, whereas only 4% indicated that they believed that employers thought that online curricula were superior. Furthermore, the majority (62%) of participants reported that online curricula would be viewed as similar in quality to traditional curricula in the future, whereas 7% believed that online curricula would be viewed as inferior to traditional curricula.

## **Grading**

The majority (46%) of participants reported using the provided grading rubrics and perceived them to be set up well. However, 20% of them indicated that they used the provided rubrics, but did not believe that they were set up well. Another 26% of participants reported that they created their own rubrics, whereas the remaining 9% claimed to use no rubric. The majority (70%) of participants indicated that they assigned grades in online courses similar to those of traditional courses. Nevertheless, 16% of them indicated that they assigned lower grades in online courses, and 14% reported that they assigned higher grades. Most (70%) participants believed that online students expected higher grades due to their belief that online courses were easier than traditional courses. Yet, 27% of them reported that they believed that students expected similar grades in online courses and traditional courses, whereas 3% indicated that they believed that students expected lower grades in online courses.

## **Job Perception**

The majority (43%) of participants indicated that they believed that they could make

more money teaching online courses as opposed to traditional courses. However, 34% of them perceived no difference between the two in terms of potential earnings, and 23% believed that they could make more money teaching traditional courses. The majority (37%) of participants endorsed time requirements for teaching as the worst aspect of teaching online, although 34% of participants indicated that the perception of online teaching by others was the worst aspect. Yet, 16% of them endorsed pay as the worst aspect of teaching online, with 13% of them selecting virtual interaction with students. The majority (54%) of participants reported that the best aspect of teaching online was the virtual interaction with students. However, 27% endorsed time requirements, and 11% selected pay as the best aspect of teaching online. The remaining 7% indicated that the best part of teaching online was the perception of it by others.

## **Discussion**

The results presented in this report provide initial insights into online adjunct professors' perceptions of online education. Consistent with the findings of Ward, Peters, and Shelley (2010), the majority of participants

perceived the quality of online education to be the same as that of traditional education. Whereas most of them reported grading using equal standards in online courses and traditional courses, the majority of them believed that students expected faculty members in online courses to grade more easily. This perception of student expectations appears to be in line with previous findings that students expect to receive higher grades in online courses (Hannay & Newvine, 2006). Furthermore, most participants reported that they believed that they can make more money teaching online than in a traditional setting. In terms of perceptions of the best and the worst aspects of teaching online, the majority of participants endorsed student interaction and time requirements, respectively.

### **Limitations**

The results presented in this report should be considered in light of its limitations. Data were collected from a relatively small number of online adjunct professors in one LinkedIn group. The extent to which this report's findings generalize to other online professors is unclear. It was assumed that individuals in the LinkedIn group from which the data were

collected had taken or taught at least one course in both an online and a traditional setting. It is possible that one or more of them did not have experience with online education, which might have impacted their perceptions. In addition, no data were collected on the specific universities at which they had experience. It is possible that perceptions varied within and between participants based on the specific institutions, rather than larger differences in online versus traditional education. Also, the data-collection instrument was developed for the purpose of this report. Although a pilot test was conducted, the psychometric properties were not examined.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This report represents an initial attempt to understand online adjunct faculty members' perceptions of online education. Additional research is needed, given the complexities associated with comparing online education and traditional education (Gilles, Detroz, & Blais, 2011). Gathering data from faculty members who are currently teaching both online courses and face-to-face courses (or even the same course both online and face-to-face) at the same university might limit the influence of

confounding variables and enhance understanding in terms of their perceptions of the two. Future researchers might also explore perceptions of online courses without comparison to traditional courses, as doing so implies that the latter is the standard to which the former should be compared. In addition, they might take working conditions into account, as they may impact online faculty members' opinions of the job. Beck (2007) stated that each online university may have unique training and job requirements.

Administrators at some online institutions provide more guidance, pay more, have larger class sizes, conduct more reviews, and/or require more activities than others (Beck, 2007). These differences might make it difficult to compare online education and traditional education from an online faculty member's perspective.

It has been reported that perceptions of the quality of online education vary due to factors, including the structure and requirements of each course (Dykman & Davis, 2008). Part of the challenge associated with understanding perceptions of online education is that online courses may differ from traditional courses due to the technology, abilities, and skills involved (Reid,

2012). Some faculty members may view themselves as facilitators, rather than as central characters in the course. Future researchers might examine the influence of these factors more closely. Furthermore, a data-collection instrument might be developed, pilot tested, and evaluated in terms of soundness to ensure both validity and reliability. Also, a qualitative study might be conducted to obtain richer data that could help to uncover some of the reasoning behind some of the responses.

### **Conclusion**

Online education is in its infancy; however, it continues to grow at a rapid pace. Despite some of the controversy surrounding it, preliminary findings presented in this report suggest that many online adjunct professors view online courses positively in comparison to traditional courses. However, they seem to believe that others, including students and employers, view them more negatively. In addition, many of the online adjunct professors in this study appear to view teaching online courses as an opportunity to earn as much or more money than teaching traditional courses. Nevertheless, the amount of time spent teaching was frequently cited as both a

positive and a negative aspect of online courses, suggesting some variability across online faculty members. The main person with whom students connect in online courses is the professor, whose opinions may help to guide curriculum development. The findings of this report suggest provide evaluations of online courses as compared to traditional courses.

that online adjunct professors generally hold favorable views of online education, but struggle with the negative views of others. These findings are important, as they are the ones who are delivering and, at times, designing the curriculum. Consequently, they might be in the best position to

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