

THE RELEVANCE OF TOP-UP DEGREE PROGRAMMES FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT OF BUSINESS STUDENTS

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Abstract

The creation of the Université des Mascareignes in 2012 allowed the university to offer degree programmes that would address the needs of its students. Considering the possibility of tapping into the market of existing and past diploma holders, the university staff sought of the relevance of 'Top-Up' degrees that could cater to the needs of such segment. This research paper wants to attest the relevance of such courses three years after the university was set up. Based on interviews and informal meetings with a variety of respondents following the Top-Up courses, it was seen that such programmes still hold value among those needing them as an encouragement for progress up the ladder at work, earn a promotion and seek better living aspirations. Equally, the intrinsic value of the programme was tested. Though results were mitigated since incumbents firstly looked for the degree, it was seen that their learning was meaningful and contributed to enhancing their skills at work.

Key words: Top-Up degree, students, relevance, university.

Introduction

The creation of a university upgraded from a post-secondary institution allows it to offer degree-based programmes without the need to have an external organisation, namely a different university to endorse its existing courses and upgrading them up to a degree course. This principle earlier applied to the Université des Mascareignes (UDM)¹ which originated from a post-secondary training institution that operated two campuses in two different locations of Mauritius namely Pamplemousses and Rose Hill. Since achieving university status under a government decree in 2012, the UDM has partnered with Université de Limoges² to offer degree programmes with double certification. These are a Bachelor's degree in Social Sciences or Informatics jointly offered with a Licence en Gestion or Informatique endorsed by Université de Limoges.

This double certification looks like a magnet for prospective students given that the qualification earned can be used both in Mauritius and in any francophone setting like France or Reunion Island where students can plan to read further to Masters or Doctorate qualifications while also getting the opportunity to work in such environments. This is in line with the view of transforming Mauritius into an education hub [1].

The Problem Statement

¹See: www.udm.ac.mu

²See: www.unilim.fr

Although the system developed by the UDM with its French partner looked attractive for students enrolled as from 2012 in undergraduate programmes, there looked to be genuine interest from ex-students who had, so far, earned a Diploma after following a 2-year full-time programme or equivalent. For these students, considering moving a level higher looked to be a possible dream with the advantage that they had already undertaken a course at the UDM and they could opt for further learning. The objective for such category of students in general was that a degree programme had better standing for them in seeking job opportunities in industry where competition for getting a job has gone very high. This looked as a prospective market for the university but, at the same time, might also answer the demand from students who could improve their qualifications through an additional year of study or so.

This problem prompted course developers at the UDM to consider the relevance of top-up programmes that their university could offer and that could directly address the needs of certain students. From previous tracer studies, it was found out that around 150-200 past students could aspire for the undergraduate degree provided that a top-up programme could be developed for them.

Upgrading from diploma to top-up degrees

The coming into existence of a university structure allowed the UDM to develop undergraduate programmes in a relatively short time span where during initial sessions of collaboration, existing courses were up scaled to degree programmes to degree programmes or Licence as used in France. This required a constant update in courses with new modules added especially in the field of communication and soft skills like negotiation, presentation, language learning, etc. The new structure that was thoroughly worked out in a short time allowed the existing diploma to be revamped up to degree programmes that were at par with a French university degree level course.

In line with upgrading, it was found out that existing students having completed a diploma programme previously might be eligible for a top-up degree which would basically be reading an additional year to attain a degree status. Diploma graduates could undertake a top-up degree because career prospects for a degree graduate is much better than that of a Diploma graduate [2].

Validating existing programmes into degree programmes

There were press advertisements prior to the launching of top-up undergraduate programmes. A definition was provided to the 'top-up' concept in order to clarify doubts regarding its quality and relevance as a degree course. Firstly, UDM academics defined the 'top-up' concept as 'an ungradable management course that would complement for the gap between a diploma and an undergraduate degree. Such a gap could be identified in terms of credits being allocated to courses. As a general rule, a certificate (Year 1) level would be up to 60 credits, 60 additional credits would be for a Diploma course and an additional 60 credits would complement a degree programme [3].

Alongside, it was mentioned that under a French system of evaluation known as 'pre-jury' and jury', students would mandatorily need to complete a dissertation and a 'rapport de stage'—industrial placement report—to justify attainment of a degree level qualification where it was understated that degree level students would need to show a high level of maturity, independence and personal work before achieving a degree status.

Mounting of top-up programmes

Top-up programmes were initially upgrades of the previous diploma courses to third-year degree programmes. At the same time, it was said that there should be possibilities to develop new modules for students who might have to repeat a past module done at the diploma level. For instance, in a BSc Human Resource Management course, new additions were 'People and Talent Management', 'Human Resource Environment in Context' and 'Human Resource Public policy'.

Over the course of time, the Top-Up degree courses were standardised so that no changes or modifications could be added to the programmes. They would be just third-year programmes that should be followed by any potential diploma holder because variants stated above like industrial attachment and a mandatory dissertation would be pre-requisites to achieving degree status.

Course requirements and entry qualifications

To be eligible for a Top-Up degree, course and entry requirements had to be developed to meet the needs of prospective students. Courses should be generally specialist ones at a degree level and they should be in line with what existing universities already offer. There was also alignment with professional institutions like the ACCA, CIM, ICAEW³ among others so that students attaining a degree at UDM could also be successful in any future professional qualification prospect.

Entry requirements were reviewed. The traditional university requirement of having 2 'A' levels was maintained as a general rule while there was a special committee set up to make entry flexible to students who were experienced and had long-term work maturity. A lower level entry like a full 'O' level was required along with evidence of having undertaken short and non-examinable training programmes which could count up for Continuous Professional Development [4]. The recruitment committee would be the guarantor of recruiting students portraying such diversity.

Matching degree programmes to students' needs

While the Top-Up degrees were developed, the students' needs were also evaluated. If Blooms Taxonomy defined learning criteria on bases like knowledge, learning and application—advanced learning, the degree programme should be a means of stating the level of requirement sought from students. On the one hand, the consolidation of knowledge through a few mathematical modules was needed and, on the other hand, advanced learning concepts and theories from emerging management authors, were also requirements to fulfil the standard of a degree programme. The other advantage came from communication modules classified under 'Unité d'Enseignement 1'—desirable learning competencies in French language—was a suitable requirement that addressed students' needs. In general, the learning requirements were well developed and approved by Université de Limoges pedagogical advisors known as 'conseillers pédagogiques' [5].

Learning and research opportunities

The Top-Up degrees stood as a hallmark for the newly-established UDM and was seen as a success and a useful revenue centre for the university. In the early years, top-up programmes attracted some 100 students but with time, some 30 students join the top-up degree programmes in Social Sciences—Accounting, Human Resource Management, Banking and Financial Studies while a lower number joins the degree courses in

³ACCA-Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, CIM-Chartered Institute of Marketing, ICAEW-Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales. All these UK professional bodies are represented in Mauritius.

Information and Communications Technology.

Validation of new learning

The Top-Up degree programmes validate new learning achieved by students of the UDM. Compared to a diploma programme offered either at the university's premises or from another accredited institution, new learning takes place in the following areas.

Higher learning applications

The Top-Up degrees seek higher learning applications. Courses in 'Research Methods' that prepare students for their dissertation look into technical and deeper research applications like the normal Poisson distribution, Z and t-tests of significance [6]. Advancing into higher level Human Resource programmes demand better knowledge of law principles, emotional intelligence, professional development. Activities tend to be more research and enquiry-based and rote learning is minimised by assessing students per module or group of topics covered.

Rapport de Stage

The rapport de stage is the presentation of a comprehensive report on training and learning achieved during student placement. It is a test for self-assertion and the demonstration of effective work skills attained during the placement that lasts for three months during the final year.

Dissertation

Although dissertations are customary for all degree programmes, the Top-Up degree requires that students master concepts learnt during their final year course, but equally, over the past years and demonstrate their application in a company where they have conducted primary and secondary research. The application of theory concepts to practice is sought and this is where the challenge lies compared to a generalised discussion on an organisation.

Jury system

There are panels for student evaluation during rapport de stage and dissertation. A series of criteria is considered ranging from personal grooming to presentation methodologies like Introduction, Discussion and Findings. Direct questions asked to the student during Viva Voce also represents an innovation to many top-up students. The purpose of the viva is to establish that the student's work is of a sufficiently high standard to merit the award of the degree for which it is submitted [7].

The 'Jury System' is innovative in Mauritius which has since long inherited an Anglo-Saxon examination system [8]. In this system, votes are cast by panel members on deciding 'pass' or 'resit' as well as the possibility to cross over the pass margin unlike direct failures when students are short of a pass mark.

Relevance for career advancement

Following the discussion regarding the relevance of Top-Up degree programmes prepared by the UDM, the argument was to find out why 'top-up' degree programmes were necessary for aspiring students. Two hypotheses were developed to seek the relevance of such programmes in students' career and professional advancement.

The hypotheses were as follows:

H1: Top-Up degree programmes help students secure better chances in the future during career advancement.

Null Hypothesis: Top-Up degree programmes have no effect on students to secure better

chances in the future during career advancement.

H2: Top-Up degree programmes address the needs of aspiring students by partly compensating their continuous professional development.

Null Hypothesis: Top-Up degree programmes do not necessarily address the needs of aspiring students by partly compensating their continuous professional development.

Research Methodology

Owing to a relatively small number of students enrolled for Top-Up degree programmes either Full or Part-Time, random sampling was done with 15 students out of 17 engaged in a Top-Up degree in Human Resource Management and 5 engaged in a related degree in Accountancy. 5 other students doing a BSc Information Technology course were also selected for the research purpose.

The technique used was a questionnaire approach based on questions being asked to the students both formally and informally. In a formal manner, students would respond to questions that they were asked. Informally, students would forward their views in an open discussion that was undertaken in class.

Research Questions

The research questions for both hypotheses were classified as follows:

H1: Top-Up degree programmes help students secure better chances in the future during career advancement.

-Did you think of career advancement prior to engaging in the Top-Up degree?

-How far do you value a degree to a diploma course?

-Do you think that degree holders are better valued at work than non-degree holders?

-Is a Top-Up degree a pathway for progress at work?

H2: Top-Up degree programmes address the needs of aspiring students by partly compensating their continuous professional development.

-Are Top-Up degrees meaningful to you?

-Do they really address what you want to achieve at work?

-Is a Top-Up programme tailored to your needs?

-Do you follow a Top-Up programme just to get a certificate?

Research Findings

Since the research was more qualitative in terms of information sought, respondents' arguments were selected rather than a numerical estimate of the answers. The inclination of thoughts —either positive or negative or neutral—could both support and reject the hypothesis.

Regarding the first hypothesis, H1: Top-Up degree programmes help students secure better chances in the future during career advancement. The views per question item are briefly synthesised below:

Thinking of career advancement prior to engaging in the Top-Up degree

Career advancement is a must for me as it helps me progress at work... The fact that career advancement allows me to aspire for better living was a compelling need to read for a 'Top-Up' degree... Career progress guarantees better wages and degree-level learning can hopefully justify it... Though career progress is not immediate, I can feel the need to read for an undergraduate degree.

Valuing a degree to a diploma course

Degree courses are sought after in every business and they have much weight over a diploma course... In the traditional Mauritian educational system, degrees have always been praised and an opportunity to do them looks tempting... A degree commands better pay and position at work... Degrees are now more common and partly replace diploma courses.

Degree holders are better valued at work than non-degree holders

In almost any organisation, degrees are better valued than any other course... Degrees are also means of attesting being a university graduate, a prestige so far... A degree better positions for a middle or upper management level career... Degree holders earn better salaries than diploma holders.

A Top-Up degree a pathway for progress at work

Top-Up degrees allow students to complete a degree level course in a short-term...The one-year add-on programme is a possibility to quickly attain a degree and get ready for a promotion...Since promotions are looming, a Top-Up degree is worthwhile...Government now recognises and rewards 'Top-Up' degree holders.

Regarding Hypothesis H2 that stated Top-Up degree programmes address the needs of aspiring students by partly compensating their continuous professional development, respondents offered the following responses.

Top-Up degrees are meaningful to the incumbent

In general, the Top-Up degree partly satisfied my needs as a learner though I found the course quite interesting...Top-Up degree was meaningful because of the concepts like 'rapport de stage' and soft skills learned during the course...Admittedly, a Top-Up course is short but the experience of getting through it remains useful.

Top-Up degrees really address what students want to achieve at work

The HRM Top-Up degree was interesting and covered certain new aspects of the profession...As an Accounting student, I found new applications in the field being well addressed and professionally focused...For an IT student, I think that concepts like heuristic models and project management were definitely attractive.

'Top-Up programmes are tailored to the needs of aspiring students

This is a difficult question since we are seeking the degree and the UDM offers us a programme...It is a 'tailored' programme but a short span does not necessarily address all our needs...It is clearer to say that the longer degree course starting from scratch could be better but new and advanced techniques learned in the Top-Up were good...The dissertations were a challenge and I think that the 'Top-Up' programme partly answered it.

Top-Up programmes are followed just to get a certificate

It might be an irrational way to think like this but this is what we needed...The end point is to get a degree and afford being a graduate but a certificate is worth a hundred pounds...If employers look for certificates, then the recognised UDM Top-Up meets the expectations...Why not think of a Master's programme or even a Doctorate' after the Top Up degree.

DISCUSSION

Regarding the first hypothesis H1 where Top-Up degree programmes help students secure better chances in the future during career advancement. It was a generally highly positive assertion given that degrees are usually highly cited for higher job positions for

students. In the USA, for those with bachelor's degrees or higher—and particularly for those with advanced degrees—the earnings premium has increased markedly over time [9]. Since Top-Up students might be already working in general, the degree could make them progress through the ladder. Diploma courses looked to be an 'exit point' for students and coming back to read for a degree was an additional effort that should be linked with reward. There was a general impression that degree holders look to be better qualified and hold a higher academic background than diploma holders. Ultimately, although the economic condition of Mauritius does not really prompt the country to offer more wage spending like promotion, students could also accept such a possible argument.

Regarding the second hypothesis H2 stating that Top-Up degree programmes address the needs of aspiring students by partly compensating their continuous professional development, certain points could be noted. Generally, as the main argument focused on the intrinsic value of the degree, answers were mitigated. A college degree is viewed as an official recognition of the formal education accumulated in college, which has a dual value: an intrinsic value, enhancing the student's personality; and a market value, increasing the student's chances of getting a 'rewarding job' [10]. The concept that Top-Up degrees are meaningful could gather answers that would justify their 'raison d'être'. Just doing a degree that is not interesting could be of little value. Students were happy that the degree that they were following made them learn new things that were added-on to what they had earlier mastered though some repetitive courses might also add to consolidating what they earlier learned. Eventually, it was difficult to state that the Top-Up degree was tailored to the needs of aspiring students but this was a necessity prior to be of intrinsic importance. Finally, the need to be awarded a degree was an end in itself because students stated that this was what employers were looking for and what they were themselves 'running after'.

Conclusion

It could be here concluded that Top-Up degree programmes have their relevance in a university that affords offering them to students who are seeking a higher qualification following the study of a diploma programme or equivalent. Given that the resultant qualification is the same—a full honours degree, this opens up a wider variety of career options, can lead to promotion or salary increases, as well as giving students the opportunity for further study [11]. The one-year add-on programme looks attractive with a short-term spent on learning and personal sacrifices to obtain a degree that looks like a stepping stone to the career advancement of any incumbent. The Null Hypothesis that disregarded their relevance could not be accepted within the specific environment of the UDM.

Addressing Continuous Professional Development might also support the relevance of Top-Up degree programmes. Though partly accepted and partly defended, students might not only look for the end result while earning the degree. It is felt that there is meaningful work achieved especially when students go one level up and that they have challenging work to do. Wragg (2014) supports the view that much advice on which degree to study is concentrated purely on obtaining a job in the future. Academics are

discouraged by many from pursuing abstract interests because, apparently, the prospects are unrealistic [12].

To sum up, incumbents seeking a Top-Up degree find it correct to follow the course offered by the UDM and endorsed by the Université de Limoges. Though the double certification counts, it might not necessarily be the first factor that induces students to follow the programme. It is broadly seen that a genuine degree having enough challenges and satisfying the future aspirations of students remain the key concepts underlying the relevance of Top-Up degree programmes.

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