



COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING



POLICY BRIEF

**Doctoral Study and
Research Degrees:
Online and Distance
Programmes**



The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to promote the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.

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The information and data in this policy brief is based on the report on the *Status of Research and Engineering Programmes Offered Online* written by Professor Romeela Mohee, Education Specialist, Higher Education at the Commonwealth of Learning and the submission reports of Professor Peters, Emeritus Professor, Open University of UK and Dr Susan Bainbridge, doctoral graduate from Athabasca University.

Author: Alan Tait
Professor Emeritus of Distance Education and Development
The Open University, UK

Editor: Professor Romeela Mohee
Education Specialist: Higher Education
Commonwealth of Learning, Canada

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COMMONWEALTH OF LEARNING

4710 Kingsway, Suite 2500

Burnaby, British Columbia

Canada V5H 4M2

Telephone: +1 604 775 8200

Fax: +1 604 775 8210

Web: www.col.org

Email: info@col.org

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Professor Emeritus of Distance Education and Development

The Open University, UK

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Recommendations



1. Governments and universities should consider ensuring the availability of doctoral and research degree programmes online and at a distance to support access for a wider range of adult learners, thereby increasing innovation and knowledge production.
2. Universities offering doctoral and research degrees online or at a distance must ensure an adequate policy framework that aligns with institutional strategy, the appointment of appropriately qualified and trained supervisors, appropriate programmes of study and assessment, and mechanisms for student engagement and interaction.
3. Quality assurance and regulatory frameworks should cover both campus-based and online and distance doctoral degrees in an integrated way.



Introduction



Historically, knowledge production and innovation have been concentrated in the Global North. Research and doctoral degrees, however, are essential for supporting knowledge production and innovation in all countries. Increasing the opportunities for research and doctoral degrees, in terms of boosting absolute numbers and widening the range of doctoral students, is a key component in national strategies for development.

The provision of research and doctoral degrees through online and distance education modes is now well established in many countries in a range of campus-based and open universities. These alternative methods have proved able to offer the same rigour and standards as face-to-face (F2F) programmes.

Online education refers to any educational programme delivered to students via the Internet using various technological, multi-media and social media objects and tools. Online learning has taken several names over the past two decades, the most common being eLearning, web-enhanced learning, technology-enabled learning, ICT learning, blended learning, hybrid learning and adaptive learning. The advantages of online learning are multiple, the most important ones being that self-paced,

good-quality pedagogical materials are available to a greater number of learners, irrespective of their sociocultural background and their geographical location, and at a reasonable cost. Distance education systems that retain some elements of print and F2F services remain relevant in many countries.

This policy briefing sets out the background to this expanding mode of provision and its place in complementing campus-based programmes.

There are a number of reasons why online and distance research and doctoral degrees play a valuable role in the overall national educational offerings of colleges and universities. These include:

- participation by adult learners who are unable to access full-time campus education due to family responsibilities, rurality, cost or working commitments;
- supporting a wider range of adult students in research and doctoral degrees, offering part-time studies, and providing a career ladder for those in the workplace; and
- more gender-friendly modes of study for women, whose double burden of family and work responsibilities is a significant constraint on full-time opportunities.



Admission Requirements



Most online or distance doctoral degree programmes require the applicant to have a master's degree and in some cases a bachelor's degree with a specific grade point average or level of qualification (usually a 2:1 honours degree) at the undergraduate level. Enrolment and

induction into programmes often require the student to be on site. For some disciplines, such as education, the major admission requirement for doctoral programmes and professional doctorates is practical experience in the field, along with a portfolio of previous study at an advanced level.

Curriculum



The independent nature of studies for doctoral students/candidates means they work on their own throughout the programme, in regular communication with their supervisor. For those disciplines where laboratory or design work is required, provision must be made with research centres or partner universities. For example, the Open

University UK (UKOU) operates through several affiliated research centres across the world to provide support to its doctoral students. The full-time and part-time doctoral degrees currently offered online by open universities relate primarily to the disciplines of education, business administration, arts, economics and social sciences.

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Coursework



In cases where there is coursework, students have to spend one week on campus to take specialised courses. In some programmes, students are requested to be on campus for 30 days a year and must meet their supervisors once per term. UK institutions typically offer doctoral programmes that incorporate online classes and seminars or brief on-campus residencies. Often, intensive summer courses are part of the curriculum. In the online courses, students have access to recorded lectures and can complete class assignments on their own schedules. The

Web enables them to interact frequently with professors and peers. At Athabasca University, Canada, the first two years of doctoral programmes include coursework. Students then move on to the proposal stage, candidacy and dissertation by research. Many universities in the USA have requirements for taught elements or course work in various subjects such as research methodology. The coursework culminates in qualifying examinations before the student can undertake a dissertation.

Assessment



The overall assessment for a doctoral degree consists mainly of the thesis evaluation, either F2F or online. A viva voce for the thesis defence is usually organised at the end of the research period. External examiners are selected from different universities to ensure an independent evaluation. The traditional form for the doctoral oral examination (viva) works with no significant difference, regardless of whether it is conducted F2F or

in an online virtual setting (e.g., via Skype). The virtual settings offer audio and visual tools, and the examination operates in the same fashion in either setting. At Athabasca University, proposal and dissertation oral defences are conducted through Adobe Connect using audio and video. The degree certificates do not mention the mode of study, i.e., whether the doctorate was obtained F2F or online and at a distance.

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Policy Framework



A policy framework has to be developed by institutions proposing to offer doctoral and research degrees through online and distance modes. Appropriate approval procedures must be followed for the selection and training of academic supervisors. The departments and

institutions must also demonstrate how the proposed online doctoral programme fits with the strategic direction of the department or university. At the same time, adequate resources for supervising online candidates have to be provided.

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“Academic faculty leading successful PhD programmes should have expertise in online teaching and learning in order to produce innovative and engaging online doctoral programmes.”

Supervision and Student Support



When coursework is involved, block teaching can be envisaged. The courses or modules will require attention to pedagogy, instructional design, learner support systems and assessment, as for any online or distance course. Careful attention has to be given to student engagement and assessment procedures. Interactions with students (especially providing assignment feedback and responding to queries) should be managed in a timely manner.

Regarding doctoral degrees with laboratory work, arrangements should be provided to enable students to undergo the practical component at other universities or research centres. Formal agreements must be secured with research centres or partner universities to support the practical work and to define the supervisory aspects required.

Academic faculty leading successful PhD programmes should have expertise in online teaching and learning in order to

produce innovative and engaging online doctoral programmes. Doctoral students must be given reasonable opportunities for discussion with peers and for participation in debates, conferences and workshops in the same way and to the same extent as on-campus students. The doctoral degree should provide a learning experience comparable to that enjoyed by on-campus students, especially with respect to intellectual challenge, fully in line with the standards expected of any doctoral programme.





Quality Assurance for Doctoral Degrees



In many cases, students can select F2F or online versions of the same doctoral programme. The same quality assurance (QA) mechanisms and regulations apply whatever the mode of study. In open universities or their equivalent, the emphasis is on comparability and equivalence with the provision in F2F institutions, and the involvement of external assessors and examiners should be made explicit.

Online and distance doctoral degrees are subjected to the internal QA of the respective institutions, and in many cases they follow the same QA procedures as F2F programmes. A university offering an online or distance doctoral programme is often accredited/licensed by the appropriate national authorities under various acts/frameworks, such as the UK

Quality Assurance Agency Framework for Higher Education (QAA, 2012). The online Doctor of Business Administration, offered by the University of Liverpool, UK, is accredited by the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business. In general, supervisors are appointed by the relevant academic boards at the universities, and they have to subscribe to similar criteria of supervision as for other programmes.

The rigour of the QA requirements ensures that the mode of provision is irrelevant to the quality of the qualification. Models requiring only research for the programme of work leading to the award of doctoral degrees should have no difference between the QA requirements of online and on-campus modes.

Regulatory Frameworks and Accreditation



As online learning becomes more prevalent, policy considerations become important, especially pertaining to recognition, accreditation and jurisdiction. Accreditation of higher education is usually conducted by a national body or a governmental agency; in most countries, the same agency looks at on-campus higher-education programmes alongside online and distance programmes. For example, in Canada, online programmes are recognised by virtue of being offered by a higher-education institution that has been licensed by the provincial government in whose jurisdiction the institution is located. The Career College Accreditation Program accredits online courses. The courses at Athabasca University have additional accreditation from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. In terms of QA in the UK, Malaysia, South Africa and Australia,

the guidelines and procedures are set by the local QA agency/authority – for example, the Malaysia Qualifications Authority, the QAA, the South African Qualifications Agency, and the Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Agency.

It is crucial that a proper regulatory framework be put in place to set regulations governing the provision of online and distance doctoral and research degrees and to provide for an independent QA body to oversee enforcement. A significant issue for policy makers is ensuring that online education providers observe the highest-quality academic requirements and do not become degree mills. To protect online learners, national authorities have to pay particular attention to accreditation agencies.

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Jurisdiction and Authorisation



Governments have the responsibility to develop and adapt authorisation policies and practices for online and distance post-secondary programmes at the national level. Online and distance research and doctoral programmes must be offered only in disciplines in which the institution is already approved to offer master's level programmes supported by relevant academic specialisms. Criteria have to be developed against which institutions will be given authorisation to develop and deliver these programmes, with details on the QA process in place. These should include provisions for library access, student

supervision and support, a research student community, and access to a research culture, and where relevant, provisions for practical work, design work, industrial placement and work-based learning.

The programmes need to be approved and accredited at the national level by the relevant qualification agencies and professional bodies. Compliance with the requirements of all bodies has to be clearly demonstrated. Furthermore, careful attention must be applied when universities want to operate in jurisdictions outside their own regions or countries.



Conclusions



It is clear from this overview that research and doctoral degrees are widely available through online and distance programmes from a range of colleges and universities, both those that are primarily campus-based and those that are primarily or solely online or at a distance. The reputation and recognition of these qualifications depends more on the standing of the individual institution than on the mode of study,

which in itself makes no difference to the quality of the outcomes. For institutions or governments that wish to include a wider range opportunities for research and doctoral programmes, both in terms of absolute numbers and for adult and part-time learners in particular, online and distance modes offer a recognised and effective complement to campus-based study.

References



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4710 Kingsway, Suite 2500
Burnaby, BC V5H 4M2 Canada
Phone + 604 775 8200 / Fax + 604 775 8210



info@col.org



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