

Preface

This book was inspired by the growth of the professional degree and its delivery via the Internet, as well as by the editors' personal experiences of studying and teaching via the Internet. The Internet has afforded many individuals, who may never have been able to achieve their ambitions if the only study option was on-campus study, the opportunity to study for a professional degree. This opportunity has proven popular, and is one that the academy has been quick to offer. However, challenges, issues, and questions of relevance and quality of delivery have increasingly been raised in relation to these professional degree programs.

This volume presents a set of 12 cases that interrogate the presentation of the professional degree via the Internet, and present a balanced picture of the state of the art for such degrees during the second decade of the 21st century. Twelve cases by different authors collected together in one volume can turn out to be disappointing. We, however, are confident that the current volume will not disappoint. The individual cases have their particular styles and approaches to the professional degree delivered via the Internet. In some cases, this is explicit and in others, implicit. Yet, even when implicit, the relevance to the professional degree delivered via the Internet is apparent to the reader with experience of such degrees as a student, as a member of a teaching team, or as a program designer. The relevance of all the chapters is heightened and made dynamic in the supporting materials that accompany each case. These materials offer the reader, student, or lecturer the opportunity for directed reflection about the case they have just read. These materials also provide suggested further readings that provide the reader with a route into the body of literature surrounding each case. The tensions within and between the cases also become more apparent when the cases are worked with using the supporting materials. The reader ought not view these as minor appendixes to each case, but as integrated elements that will develop her personal understanding of each case and assist in placing the messages into her teaching and learning context.

This volume will speak to academics currently involved in presenting professional degrees via the Internet and provide them with tools to reflect upon their program design, develop and improve their programs, and find support for how their program is currently designed and presented. This volume will also speak to academics who have yet to be involved in presented professional degrees via the Internet, or are in the process of developing such a degree program for their academy, and the volume will speak to past, current, and potential students of professional degrees via the Internet.

To set the scene, the first chapter, “Studying Professional Degrees via the Internet: Challenges, Issues, and Relevance from the Student’s Perspective,” presents a personal reflective case based on studying four professional degrees via the Internet over the first 12 years of the 21st century. The case raises many of the questions that form the core of later chapters. Specifically, the chapter points to the cases by Joyes, Fischer, Firth and Coyle, Bolander Laksov, Silén, and Engqvist Boman, and Deutschmann. The case considers aspects that reoccur in more detail in later cases and as such provides a personalized entrance into the issues, challenges, and questions of relevance for the reader to juxtapose with the more formal cases that follow. This first chapter discusses the key themes of initial contact, communication, support, deadlines, work, and keeping going. Of most use to the potential student is the list of key skills that should be considered by the potential student prior to enrolling in a professional degree program that is delivered via the Internet. These key skills also resonate in the later chapters of the volume.

Chapter Two, “Experiences of an Online Doctoral Course in Teacher Education,” continues the student perspective theme, but this time at doctoral level. Although the first case discusses the diversity of the professional doctorate and its rapid rise in popularity, the first case only considers studying graduate taught degrees. This case focuses on the doctoral level and is an excellent complement to the first case. The case is a personal reflective case study by Despina Varnava-Marouchou and Mark A. Minott. They look back on the nudge, motivators, and experiences of studying for a Doctorate in Education delivered from a second country that is far from home. Despina was based on Cyprus and Mark even further away on the Cayman Islands while they studied the Doctor of Education program presented by The University of Nottingham, England (see the case in this volume by Joyes, Fisher, Firth, and Coyle for more details of this Doctor of Education program from the lecturers’, course designers’, and other students’ perspectives). Many of the elements of first case can be found in the case, suggesting that the shift from graduate to doctoral level does not majorly impact the distance professional degree and the students’ experiences. Varnava-Marouchou and Minott conclude that placing students at the centre of the learning experience allows them to have control of their time and the process of learning, but for this to result in successful study requires the student to change how she thinks about planning, teaching, and learning.

Chapter Three, “Plagiarism: Catalysts and Not so Simple Solutions,” considers one of the growing concerns of distance (and non-distance) education—plagiarism. The use of technology to check for plagiarism has recently resulted in the fall of a number of German politicians who took their doctorates many years ago, and may even have used a typewriter to produce them. Immediate detection was unknown 15 years ago. Today there are many plagiarism detection tools that can be used to assist the lecturer. Usoof, Hudson, and Lindgren present a balanced case discussion of plagiarism that does not fall into the common traps of, for example, claiming plagiarism is new, that it is easily defined, or that it can easily be detected. This aligns with the work of Eriksson and Sullivan (2008) that examined lecturers’ understandings and attitudes. Usoof, Hudson, and Lindgren problematize plagiarism before turning to plagiarism in distance education, catalysts of plagiarism, and methods used to detect plagiarism before presenting good practices that may help prevent and act as deterrents of plagiarism. Here they stress the need for innovative teaching and assessment design.

Part of creating innovative teaching and assessments is the creation of online communities that afford such innovations. In Chapter Four, Mats Deutschmann presents the case, “Creating Online Community: Challenges and Solutions.” His case reports on a study based at Mid Sweden University, which is a small multi-campus university in Northern Sweden. Forty-five percent of this university’s students are distance-based students who undertake much of their study via the Internet. Mats’s case reports on building collaborative learning into online professional degree programs. Perhaps not surprisingly, we again see elements of the first two cases reflected in the program design—the importance of supporting prospective students, fostering community building and collaborative learning, and creating contexts beyond the virtual classroom. Mats effectively illustrates his case with student examples, and he wisely ends his case by pointing out “what may be a good model today, might be less so tomorrow.” The technology associated with providing distance professional degree programs via the Internet is evolving rapidly. Future devices supporting the ubiquity of teaching and learning will impact on best practice.

In Chapter Five, Huahui Zhao discusses how to introduce peer collaboration in a networked English writing class. This case links with the previous case by Mats Deutschmann. Peer collaboration in writing both requires and creates online community. Huahui introduces the Dadaelous Integrated Writing Environment (DIWE) before discussing challenges to creating networked peer collaboration and assessment. These challenges again resonate with the other cases in this volume—students’ technological skills, students’ online discussion skills, and shifted teachers’ and students’ roles in online learning. Huahui concludes her case with elements that are often oddly missing, those of training in technological use (cf. making sure the students and staff have this prior to starting the program), training in online collaboration skills (cf. hoping they will develop naturally), and teacher training in using networked peer assessment (cf. assuming the campus teacher can easily shift to the online mode of delivery).

The next case, “Listening and Learning through ICT with Digital Kids: Dynamics of Interaction, Power, and Mutual Learning between Student Teachers and Children in Online Discussion,” by Dianne Forbes of the University of Waikato, New Zealand focuses on students undertaking their Bachelor of Teaching degree as a distance education degree at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. The case is excitingly different from the others in this volume as it reports on the experiences of, as Forbes writes, “involving children in online discussion with student teachers.” Rather than focusing on the student body and peer interaction, this case shows how distance-based teaching can use ICT to include clients, in this case children. The case explores the interaction and social dynamics observed, and mutual learning experienced, with links to theoretical perspectives including constructivist and democratic pedagogies. Forbes’ case not only shows that it has implications for practice, but also that the distance professional degree can turn the online environment to its advantage.

In Chapter Seven, Catherine E. Stoicov of the University of Guam, presents a case that focuses on creating “Culturally Responsive Online Learning for Asian/Pacific Islanders in a Pacific Island University.” Catherine’s case draws on the Chamorro and Filipino core cultural values, and constructs a model for constructing an online learning environment based on a culturally inclusive instructional design that will support Asian/Pacific islanders’ learning in blended courses. Catherine paints a detailed picture of Guam and its indigenous population, and discusses culturally responsive education as the base for her case. Many of the case’s recommendations find resonance in this volume’s other cases.

In Chapter Eight, Rich Magjuka and Xiaojing Liu present “A Case Study of Online MBA Courses: Online Facilitation, Case-Based Learning, and Virtual Team.” The case focuses on an online MBA program in business school at a large Mid-Western university and uses interviews with instructors and students to find out how satisfied the students are, what strategies the instructors use in teaching, how the students perceived the effectiveness of their teaching and learning experience, and what challenges and issues the students and instructors perceive for professional online courses. Rich and Xiaojing identify the need for the instructors and students to receive more guidance and support, technologically and pedagogically, in order to create a more engaging and fruitful online learning environment.

The minimization of the effects of physical and cultural distances is a core element of the case, “A Case Study of a Distance Degree Program in Vietnam: Examples from a Learner-Centered Approach to Distance Education,” presented in Chapter Nine by Kristy Beers Fägersten. Kristy reports on the distance-learning program for English teachers at secondary and tertiary institutions in Vietnam. The English Department at Högskolan Dalarna, Sweden, participates in a distance-learning program with the Faculty of Education at Vietnam National University, and the Vietnamese students study half time for two years to complete a Master’s

degree in English Linguistics. This degree strengthens the students' professional standing as teachers of English. Kristy's case echoes Catherine Stoicovy's case on culturally responsive online learning. The learner-centered design of the Kristy's case prioritizes a culture of groups and a learning community that is designed to foster a learning community composed of students who are academically equal and trained to participate actively in the Web-based environment. Kristy concludes, "The distance format can be effectively exploited to overcome such challenges and ultimately enable successful intercultural education." Fostering a community of learners again resonates as a core element of this case.

Chapter Ten, "Implementation of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning through an On-Line Masters Program," by Klara Bolander Laksov, Charlotte Silén, and Lena Engqvist Boman of Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden links back to the first case of this volume. The international masters program in medical education is one of the professional distance degrees that form part of the personal reflective case presented in Chapter One, and is the first of two student-instructor case pairs. This case focuses on the first course of the master's program, "Scholarship of Medical Education," and follows its development and first presentation. The case presents the underlying ideas and principles for what the authors wanted to accomplish in the program. One point made in this case is that over half of the participants did not feel their employers supported their study. This is of interest to professional degree providers, and resonates with the first case study where the importance of grounding the intention to study with family, friends, and work is viewed as an important action. This finding is important for assessment, and Klara, Charlotte, and Lena write in relation to revision of the course "Scholarship of Medical Education," "The examination task needs to be somewhat reduced so that students are not put into a situation with work overload and steered into a reproductive approach to learning." This case also provides the students' evaluation comments about the course. These provide a picture of how the teaching and learning was experienced.

The second of the two student-instructor case pairs, "The Nature of a Successful Online Professional Doctorate," presents and discusses the professional doctorate in Teacher Education offered by the University of Nottingham, England, that Despina Varnava-Marouchou and Mark A. Minott discussed from the students' perspective in Chapter Two. Gordon Joyes, Tony Fisher, Roger Firth, and Do Coyle provide a case that gives voice to both those teaching and supervising the students and the students. These authentic student voices reveal the breadth of competencies and skills the professional doctorate in education provides. These voices juxtapose the description of the course and its development. This, together with Chapter Two, allows for a multi-layered understanding of how course design, mode of delivery, teaching, learning, and teacher and student bodies interact.

The final case, “Secure E-Learning and Cryptography,” presents a very different perspective on distance professional degrees. Wasim A. Al-Hamdani introduces the readers of this volume to the world of cryptography. Wasim investigates the problem of secure e-learning and how cryptography algorithms can be used as tools to ensure integrity, confidentiality, non-reputations, authentication, and access control to provide secure knowledge delivery, secure student feedback, and secure assessments. These are issues that educationalists and students rarely consider, but are required if the validity of distance professional degrees is not to be compromised. Wasim presents a new cryptograph e-learning model based on PKI and cryptography access control. The mathematical details of this case may challenge some readers, but the message of the case can be accessed without understanding the mathematical detail.

Each of the twelve cases contained in this volume contribute to our understanding of the complexities of creating, delivering and studying a distance professional degree. The cases illuminate these complexities from different angles, and the unique collection that this volume represents shows that students are generally happy. Yet things can be better, and most importantly, that they will get better! This volume will contribute to the improvement of distance professional degrees.

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