

Chapter 71

Studying Professional Degrees via the Internet: Challenges, Issues, and Relevance from the Student's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This case places the student in focus and through a reflective case study considers four distance professional degree programs. The author of this case followed these programs as life-long learning professional activities. The case considers the nudge, the study, and degree completion. The reflection is structured around the themes of initial contact, communication, support, deadlines, work, and keeping going. These themes reveal challenges, issues, and questions of relevance for the student and university. Key skills to assist the student towards completion are suggested along with what the potential student should consider prior to enrolling in a professional degree program that is delivered via the Internet. The growth in distance professional degrees, including professional doctorates, demonstrates the importance of the challenges, issues, and questions of relevance considered in this case from the student's perspective.

BACKGROUND

Today, universities and colleges provide a wide-range of professional degrees and degrees that support the professional. The development of these degrees is particularly noticeable in the proliferation of professional doctorates. Today the professional looking to gain a doctoral degree can, for example, study for a Doctorate in Education (EdD), Ministry (DMin), Tourism (DTourism) Clinical Psychology (DClinPsy),

Business Administration (DBA), Medical Ethics (DMedEth), or Audiology (AuD). Many of these doctoral degree programs are designed so that the student can continue in full-time employment during their period of registration, and designed so that study can occur flexibly. Two cases in this volume (Joyes, Fisher, Firth & Coyle, and Varnava-Marouchou & Minott) consider the Doctor of Education program in Higher Education at the University of Nottingham, UK. Joyes et al.'s case examines the design and running of the EdD

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program, Varnava-Marouchou & Minott's case examines how the program meets the students' needs and expectations.

The range of professional degrees offered via distance teaching is not limited to doctoral training; one example is the Masters in Medical Education discussed in Bolander Lakov, Silén and Engqvist Boman (this volume). Many other examples are readily found with a simple Google search; this type of degree is common and the market competitive. This case examines and reflects upon my own experience of distance degrees. Challenges, issues and relevance from the student's perspective frame this examination and reflection. This case begins by setting the stage and asks why people want to become distance students and read a professional degree (or a degree with professional application), before proceeding to my own reflections and finally suggesting ways forward for the potential professional degree student in the hunt for the ideal distance professional degree or course.

SETTING THE STAGE

Lindgren, Sullivan, Zhao, Deutschmann, and Steinvall (2011) wrote:

Lifelong learning and the importance of generic skills have gained a clearer position in higher education in Europe thanks to the Bologna Declaration (1999) in general and the Bergen Communiqué (2005) in particular as it "explicitly mentions the chance to further implement lifelong learning in higher education through qualification frameworks" (Jakobi & Rusconi, 2009: 52), and policy development in the European Union (see Dehmel, 2006 for a good overview of this policy development). What is worth mentioning here are the subtle changes in the definition of lifelong learning between 2000 and 2001 from "all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowl-

edge, skills, and competence" (CEC, 2000, p. 3) to "all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic and/or employment-related perspective" (CEC, 2001, p. 9). Dehmel highlights the removal of purposeful as informal learning with no specific purpose is a core element of lifelong learning, and the change from on an ongoing basis to throughout life that stresses continuous learning from the cradle to the end of life. Dehmel also points out a shift in the understanding of life-long learning from the 1970s to today; a shift from humanistic ideals of Bildung to "primarily utilitarian, economic objectives" (p. 52), even if these have been nuanced recently to combine the social and cultural with the economic (p. 188).

The distance professional degree is a life-long learning event. At various stages of a professional's life the need for a more structured and formal learning context can arise. It is here that the distance professional degree comes in; it aims to offer the working professional a life-long learning experience that leads to an academic award that can also assist the professional in their professional, or career, development. The impetus for venturing into part-time distance formal degree awarding education can be to improve career prospects, perhaps with a view to finding a new job, can be a career requirement from the employer who in which case may fund part or all of the costs of the degree program, or simply personal interest. Personal interest is a key lifelong learning motivator that initial degrees aim to teach students. For example, Bachelor's degrees in Sweden have the expected learning outcome that the student: "visa förmåga att identifiera sitt behov av ytterligare kunskap och att utveckla sin kompetens" *demonstrates an ability to identify the need for further knowledge and to develop their skills* (Högskoleförordning, 1993:100). If this is to mean more than learning by doing as directed by the manager or boss, the

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