# Chapter 12
# Identifying and Examining Degree-Granting Programs for Distance Education Experts: A Preliminary Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter reveals the results of a preliminary analysis of degree-granting distance education expertise programs by identifying the programs offered by higher education institutions all around the world and examining the general features of these programs from various aspects. As a result of this study, 27 degree-granting programs in 18 universities were identified in 12 different countries for distance education expertise. These programs were examined in terms of the aims and target population, educational models, delivery methods, admission and graduation requirements of the programs, and proposed career opportunities by these programs. The results of this analysis are intended to help develop a basis for the clarification of the profession; guide educational institutions, decision-makers, and program designers for developing distance education expertise programs; help individuals who intend to gain academic expertise in distance education to choose the most suitable program that meets their needs; and contribute to the research on leadership and expertise in distance education.*

## INTRODUCTION

The demand for distance education (DE) is increasing at a rapid pace all over the world. According to the research conducted by Allen and Seaman (2014), approximately one-third of all higher education students in the United States of America (USA) had taken at least one online course by the year 2012. The results of a survey study, in which the data was gathered from 113,035 respondents across 12 countries, revealed that %46 of students took any online course in the past year (Dahlstrom,

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Walker & Dziuban, 2013). This increase in the number of DE students and programs in various fields of study led to the requirement for experienced human resources having specific skills and competencies particular to the field of DE. As a consequence of the recent developments in the field, DE expertise has emerged as a new profession in the world. For the purpose of training or educating DE experts, professional development and academic programs have arisen in some countries as a result of the necessity to develop high quality DE programs. The aim of these programs is to help learners gain specific knowledge, skills and competencies in the field. Some researchers have examined the roles and related competencies of the faculty for implementing and managing a DE program in the literature; however little is known about the programs of DE and their offerings in terms of their general structure, educational models, aims, target population and career opportunities as well as roles, knowledge, skills or competencies that the learners are intended to gain. In this regard, the purpose of this chapter is to analyze the current degree-granting academic programs for DE experts by identifying the programs offered by higher education institutions in the world and examining the general features of these programs from various aspects. The chapter covers the answers of the following questions:

- Which higher education institutions offer DE expertise programs in the world?
- In which level of higher education are the programs offered?
- What are the aims and who is the target population of DE expertise programs?
- What are the features of the programs in terms of their educational models, delivery methods, admission and graduation requirements?
- What are the career opportunities (roles) for the graduates of DE expertise programs?

## Background of the Study

DE is defined as "institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive communications systems are used to connect learners, resources and instructors" by Simonson, Amaldino, Albright and Zvacek (2012, p.32). With the advancement in technology, various terms emerged to express the practices in the field such as open learning, distance learning, online learning, e-learning, web-based education, internet-based learning, flexible learning, mobile learning, ubiquitous learning, virtual education, etc. The term DE can be considered as an umbrella term encompassing all these mentioned terms.

In DE literature, it can be examined that there is more concentration on the identification of specific roles, skills and competencies that are required for DE expertise than the profiles and offerings of DE training or academic programs. One of the studies concentrating on DE expertise programs was conducted by Lindsay and Howell (2004), in which DE expertise programs in the North America were analyzed. They specified a few certificate, master's and doctorate programs in the field of DE and concluded that as an academic specialization, DE was still limited; dependent on and embedded into more established disciplines, such as education or instructional technology. They found that some universities with instructional technology programs contained a small DE focus as part of a large program of study and many graduate programs included DE as part of a broader curricular scope and offered only one or two DE courses.

When the field of instructional technology- also referred to as educational technology- is examined, it can be observed that the definitions of the field emphasize the use of technology to *support*, *facilitate* or *improve* learning and teaching process (Lever-Duffy & McDonald, 2011; Reiser & Dempsey, 2012). However, Moore and Kearsley