Chapter 51
Ethical Challenges and Adaptive Solutions Regarding Support of Online Graduate Student Research in Regions with Limited Infrastructure

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ABSTRACT

Online graduate programs have a unique opportunity to serve students in global regions that have limited infrastructure (and thus fewer educational opportunities) due to remoteness, poverty, violent conflict, ideological values that might not necessarily support educational access for all people, or other reasons. In many cases, students in these regions feel a particularly urgent need to attain educational goals, obtain scientific training, and conduct research that can help improve conditions for their community. However, the same infrastructure limitations that make education and social research so desperately necessary (e.g., shortcomings in government, commerce, law enforcement) can also present barriers to the completion of a graduate program, especially one that involves original data collection. In the cases that follow, the authors discuss how the Western (especially North American) scientific research system can be adapted to better support the ethical and pragmatic challenges of graduate students conducting research in regions with infrastructure limitations. The tension is that Western academic, regulatory, and procedural standards are sometimes prohibitive to the completion of studies in regions with conditions that limit the functioning and sustainability of the infrastructure that would normally provide a foundation for the collection and analysis of data. University faculty and staff must find ways to uphold the standards of science in a manner that is flexible and adaptive.

ONLINE GRADUATE EDUCATION IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

Besides Convenience for the Learners, What Are Some Benefits of Online Graduate Education to International Communities?

With the shifting economy and workforce, increasing numbers of mid-career adults are enrolling in graduate programs to gain skills and knowledge that can help them advance into innovation and leadership roles in their chosen professions. With globalization, increasing numbers of people all over the world have the means and motivation to seek higher education. However, the mere desire and the financial resources to obtain an advanced degree cannot become realized if that person lives in an area that contains few institutions of higher education or lacks the necessary infrastructure to support such a system. While some are willing to relocate internationally to pursue graduate education, this option is simply not appealing or feasible for many others. For decades, many nations in the so-called "developing world" have fretted about the brain drain that results when bright individuals from poorer regions relocate to wealthier communities for education but then never return home, thus furthering disparities by clustering wealth, innovation, and leadership in the regions that [arguably] need them the least. While losing adolescents to overseas *undergraduate* programs can be detrimental to a community, the loss of midcareer professionals to overseas *graduate* programs is felt even more keenly by all sectors and negatively impacts the community's innovation and leadership resources. However, the availability of *online* graduate education offers an opportunity for these mid-career professionals in regions with limited infrastructure to obtain otherwise unavailable education and skills, without necessarily abandoning their home communities that need them.

What Is the Academic Context for These Cases?

We selected two doctoral studies as this chapter's cases, but most of these issues would also apply to master's or undergraduate level research as well. Walden University is the setting for this chapter's cases and it has served remote doctoral-level learners in the social sciences for 43 years. Prior to the internet era, mail and phone correspondence were used in conjunction with face-to-face residencies (lasting four to nine days). Today, most of Walden's online doctoral programs require one to four residencies. Residencies are primarily held within the USA with a few international sites each year. While travel to the residency sites can sometimes be a challenge for the more remote students, this hybrid format permits those students to plan several residency trips over the course of several years, rather than relocating for the entire duration of a graduation program.

To What Degree Are International Students in Low-Infrastructure Regions Taking Advantage of Walden's Online Graduate Programs to Obtain a Doctoral Degree via Coursework and Research Completed in Their Home Countries?

Obtaining an accurate count of international students in an online program is difficult due to variations in how they enroll. Some enroll from their home country, others enroll while temporarily living abroad, and others enroll after permanently relocating. Some have obtained new citizenship and many have not. However, for the purpose of this case discussion, we will focus on those graduate students who have chosen to conduct their doctoral research in a region with limited infrastructure. Though there are many ways to assess and compare infrastructure, the World Economic Forum defines and measures infrastructure

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