

# Postgraduate Degree by Distance Learning

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## INTRODUCTION

Distance learning provides a wide opportunity for learners to access postgraduate qualifications. With the establishment of such open and distance learning (ODL) institutions like open universities and e-learning programs by higher learning institutions around the world, more learners are getting into postgraduate degree programs. In the United Kingdom, for example, a group of reputable institutions have established the UKeU (UK e-Universities). This article looks at the types of programs offered (master's and doctorate) and their characteristics in contrast to traditional on-campus study. We will look into the challenges and issues faced by distance learning postgraduate-degree providers, as well as those faced by the learners. Among the issues are accreditation and recognition, curriculum and assessment, instructional methods, factors influencing learners' choice of postgraduate programs, and institutional support for learners. Finally, we discuss the effects of postgraduate distance learning programs in the education landscape as a whole.

## BACKGROUND

Scott (1998) gave a lengthy discussion on the internationalization and massification of education, and some of the dimensions examined were the market-driven nature of student flows, international flows of academic staff, interuniversity collaboration, and the flow of ideas around the world. A crucial part of this internationalization and massification is definitely attributed to distance learning as a gateway to all the four dimensions above. Distance learning fulfills the demand of students for access to higher education (nonphysical flow), the intrinsic role and goal of academics as global players (being at one place, yet functioning in different regions around the world), the active collaboration of universities (as in distance learning consortia), and the communication and interaction needs through computer and media technologies.

Certainly, opportunities for distance learning are proliferating with the increasing development of computer and communications technology with improved connectivity, accessibility, viability, reliability, and usability. More and more people are getting acquainted with distance learning, and learners are starting to choose this form of learning for various reasons. McCann, Christmass, Nicholson, and Stuparich (1998), for example, have identified several reasons for the increasing demand in e-learning, which include (a) the growth of online economy and the move from old to new economy, (b) the growing demand for skills and ongoing education, (c) the developing global market in education, and (d) the developing acceptance by teachers of the value of e-learning as a teaching method. This scenario is helped by the hyped popularity of online learning as the current trend in higher education.

As distance education expands, Sherry (1996) argues that issues pertaining to learner characteristics and needs, the influence of media on the instructional process, equity of access to interactive delivery systems, and the new roles of the instructor and students in distance learning must be dealt with. Perraton (1988) rightly argues that theories of distance education must be based on existing philosophies of education as the foundational framework. There are differences with traditional educational theories, of course, but the foundation serves as a useful guide in examining and scrutinizing distance education.

Oravec (2003) noted that the diversity and range of new educational pathways in distance learning could be confusing to prospective students. There are just too many postgraduate distance learning programs available, so many different types of institutions in so many different regions around the world, so many different program structures and services, and so many promises and doubts that come together with distance learning.

However, as the demand of the workforce and employers on upgrading qualifications increases, postgraduate degrees by distance learning are gaining increasing prominence. Institutions offering distance

learning have progressively mushroomed in the United States, United Kingdom, Europe, and Asia.

## **Types of Institutions Offering Postgraduate Distance Learning Degrees**

There are many types of institutions offering distance learning courses or programs. According to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation's (CHEA) 2001 report on distance learning, the "new providers" of higher education can be categorized into five types.

1. **Stand-alone, degree-granting online institutions:** These are single and independent institutions that have no affiliations to an organization or consortium. They include (a) nonprofit organizations, for example, Western Governors University and U.S. Open University, and (b) for-profit organizations, for example, Jones International University and University of Phoenix Online Campus.

Institutions offering the programs can be those that are wholly virtual (e.g., Jones International University, Walden University, Atlantic International University) or those that have physical existence (a campus) with an online front (known as dual-mode universities, e.g., University of Southern Queensland, Australia).

2. **Degree-granting online consortia:** These are institutions that are formed through the alliance and collaboration (e.g., financially and administratively) between different subinstitutions or organizations. They can be categorized into (a) for-profit consortia, for example, Cardean University (made up of University of Chicago School of Business, Carnegie Mellon University, London School of Economics and Political Science, Stanford University, Columbia Business School), and (b) nonprofit consortia, for example, the National Technological University (a collaboration of more than 50 universities in the United States). Course content, materials, and support are provided by the individual institutions to students enrolled under a consortium, and the degree is awarded under the consortium's name.
3. **Non-degree-granting online consortia:** Similar to degree-granting online consortia, consortia under this category are formed through collabora-

tion between institutions or organizations, but the difference is the consortia only act as a front or directory to the participating individual institutions or organizations. The degree is conferred individually by the participating institutions and not by the consortia. An example of this type of consortium is Fathom (made up of Columbia University, the British Library, Cambridge University Press, London School of Economics and Political Science, New York Public Library, Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History).

4. **Corporate universities:** These universities (e.g., Dow Jones University and Cox University) are run by corporations. These universities not only provide teaching and training for staff development, but the courses are also open to interested individuals. For online IT training and certification, Microsoft, Novell, Oracle, and Cisco are the primary providers.
5. **Unaffiliated online programs and courses:** Can be credit-bearing educational activities or single-instance noncredit offerings. These programs and courses are not affiliated with any institutions. One example is KaplanCollege.com, which contains around 500 online courses.

Of these, only the first three are offering distance learning degrees at the postgraduate level.

## **Types of Programs Offered**

Postgraduate degrees that are offered through distance learning include masters' and doctorates in fields and specializations as varied as traditional programs. The major programs offered are in the disciplines of medicine, engineering, computing, business, and foreign language studies (Division of Government and Public Affairs, 2000). The diversity of programs actually includes less common or unconventional programs like criminal justice, environmental science, fire science, aviation science, agricultural science, and theology and divinity studies.

## **Examples of Institutions and Programs**

Plenty of these are listed online. The wealth of postgraduate programs and institutions is definitely overwhelming, and thus, it would be difficult to discuss

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