

# Doctorate Online Learning: Some Current Challenges and Future Trends

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## Introduction

In traversing the [higher education](#) (sometimes referred to as 'tertiary education') learning ecosystem, we are confronted with many different types of learning. For example, case, reflective, [experiential](#), research, among others, are all types of learning with a different purpose, and their own challenges, that may be practised at a [higher education provider](#). There was a concerted effort to rapidly move to online learning due to the challenges of the pandemic by higher education providers in Australia and internationally. However, some higher education providers and students have been learning online at various levels and disciplines for many years prior to, during, and since the pandemic. Online learning has its own challenges and providers seek to navigate these challenges now and in the future. A question to pose is: *what are some of the current challenges and future trends of online learning in business disciplines at the doctoral level (e.g. in Australia)?* This piece endeavours to answer these questions.

## Online Learning at the Doctorate Level

In doctoral degrees, for example Doctor of Business Administration (DBA), and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), candidates are studying at the [Australian Qualifications Framework](#) (AQF), [level 10](#). Higher education learning is governed in Australia through the [Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency \(TEQSA\) Act 2011 \(Cth\)](#) and the responsible regulator with a mandate for quality is the [Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency](#) (TEQSA). Doctoral learning can be undertaken at universities and higher education providers with self-accrediting authority in Australia and also at some smaller private higher education providers e.g. the [Australian Institute of Business](#) (AIB), where the doctoral degree has been accredited by TEQSA. Higher education providers and research students/candidates must abide by a "responsible code of research" or based on the [Australian Research Council codes and guidelines](#).

The online learning experience at the doctoral level will be different for each candidate due to the nature of their learning area. The online learning experience may also be inhibited or helped by the candidate's other online, hybrid, and or classroom learning experiences. What is important is that the doctoral candidate in a student-centric environment and the quality of online services offered by the higher education provider. To be able to effectively study programs and subjects online, doctoral candidates will need online access to academics, administrative staff, a learning management

platform (e.g. [Moodle](#), [Blackboard](#), etc.), library resources, other databases, as well as their own reliable online access for uploading, downloading and securely storing data, information, and other communication or collaboration tools used.

## **A Reflective Vignette of a Doctoral Journey at AIB So Far ...**

I am an online [doctoral candidate](#) about halfway through my candidature. Online learning has its challenges. These challenges have included my own initial and subsequent expectations of starting a doctorate and what it involves; progression through the various stages of course work and then self-motivation to collect primary and secondary data, and writing the thesis draft – being resilient to any setbacks along the journey; access to learning materials, academics, administrators, and supervisor(s); and any feelings, for instance, of isolation and or the inability to maintain focus at the time when milestones are due, so as to complete my doctorate by the due date. One early challenge faced was when my principal supervisor left the panel after 6-months, when I was halfway through my coursework subjects.

Since commencing my doctorate with AIB I initially went through an online induction with the Research Higher Degree (RHD) discipline leader and went through an orientation module followed by another call from the RHD discipline leader. These steps increased my confidence that I had made the right decision to start my doctorate. I was introduced to faculty academics, administrative staff, and my research panel supervisors. The research course subjects then progressed with weekly online webinars, including a reflective week every eighth week allowing me to network with other doctoral students inside and outside of study reducing the feeling of any isolation, which reinforced my self-motivation. I found having online fortnightly supervisory panel meetings or not hesitating when needing to contact my supervisors, alleviates most challenges – including the replacement of a supervisor. Since completing the course work, doctoral candidates can meet up fortnightly at AIB's Teaching and Learning meetings with the business faculty, annual internal conferences and 3-minute thesis events. Furthermore, as a doctoral candidate, I have 24/7 access to AIB's extensive online library, databases and software for my research'.

## **Online Learning Trends**

Future trends in online learning may be good or not so good. The good could be the ubiquitous access to information, data, and storage. As well as online access to platforms, libraries, software tools for data and information analysis software (e.g. [SPSS](#), [AMOS](#), [NVivo](#), etc.), and or to check for authenticity of writing (e.g. [Turnitin](#), etc.), cloud storage, newer tools to prevent bad actor intrusion beyond two-factor authentication, and faster, more reliable online connection speeds for video calls. Other tools developed or in development could be used to counter the less effective tools.

On the 'not so good side' are online threats such as generative artificial intelligence (e.g. [Chat GPT](#), etc.), which may result in academic misconduct. Where the received work for candidate assessment is not all their own work or parts which are not the creation of the student or are not cited, sourced or referenced appropriately, is likely to constitute academic or research misconduct and risks breaching institutional policies on academic and research integrity. Higher Education Providers can ensure

academic and research integrity through several measures and as per the requirements of the [Threshold Standards](#):

- Publication of appropriate “policies that promote and uphold academic and research integrity” and advise consequences of academic and research misconduct (Standard 5.2.1),
- Taking preventative action through various measures including the training of candidates during orientation and induction sessions (Standards 1.3.1 and 4.2.4), suitable guidance on what is academic and research integrity and modelling of good practice (Standard 5.2.3) and provision of learning and educational support such as libraries and software relevant to research activities (Standard 3.3.1), and
- Provision of qualified and experienced research supervisors, often through supervisory panels, who can guide candidates through their course and assessments (Standard 4.2.3).

## Conclusions

Learning at the highest level in Australia is regulated for quality by various federal government agencies. Higher education providers can deliver doctorate learning face-to-face, online or in a hybrid mode. Online learning students/candidates can feel isolated, but providers can mitigate this by providing many services online to enable students/candidates to be part of a larger networking ecosystem with peer, provider and other learning, scholarship or research support touch points.

[Artificial intelligence](#) (AI) presents both current risks and future opportunities to online learning at all levels, as per arguments circulating around the academic world currently. Some AI tools can act as an ‘aid’ for those with certain disabilities or disadvantages or can be used to generate ideas that can be used into one’s own original piece of work especially at the highest level of learning, provided there is appropriate disclosure and or academic acknowledgement of the use of artificial intelligence in learning.



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Tess Coughlan is AIB’s Quality and Accreditation Manager, with almost thirty years’ experience in teaching and learning, quality assurance, student support, regulatory compliance and program administration at both public and independent institutions within the Australian education sector. These roles have been with the Higher Education and previously secondary education, ELICOS, and Vocational Education and Training sectors, all which has provided valuable experience of the broader regulatory environment, academic quality and integrity and the student experience. She is on the Steering Committee for the Higher Education Private Providers Quality Network (HEPP-QN).



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