

# HDR Coursework at a Distance: Lessons from Literature and Experience

**Carlene Boucher**, Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

*AIB Review*, Issue 10

## Introduction

Online learning has become an accepted part of the higher education landscape and increasing participation in online, formal education has been accelerated by COVID and by the increasing demands for formal learning to be offered in flexible ways. It can be defined as '[...the use of software programs to instruct students in content and skills and to facilitate learning in and out of the traditional classroom setting](#)'. This article focuses on one small segment of learners: those doing research degrees. While the experience of online MBA candidates has been researched, less attention has been paid to PhD and DBA candidates, especially those who are also working full-time.

My own experience of online learning began when undertaking a PhD in the late 1980's and 1990's. I was in Australia and enrolled in a PhD at [Fielding Graduate University](#) in the USA. Online education was in its infancy and most contact was using physical mail, phone calls or physical visits. However, Fielding was one of the first to experiment with using very basic email and making documents available online. Online was a bit of a novelty and perhaps sped up some communication but was not very functional. It was expensive, documents could not be shared, and the software was rudimentary. The PhD program included coursework, as does the current AIB DBA online subjects, or the face-to-face PhD coursework I have facilitated at other universities in Australia.

## Characteristics of Online Research Learning

Subjects in research degrees [tend to still be largely text based](#) and may include a recording of a lecture such as that which would be delivered to a face-to-face class. Webinars may be included which attempt to replicate face-to-face classes. [Assessment is largely text-based](#) and again, like that undertaken by candidates studying on a campus. They often contain a [lot of required reading](#), especially academic journal articles. The main reason candidates choose an online degree is [flexibility](#). The capacity to study anywhere at any time, independent of the availability of others and in their own way, is critical.

## Challenges of Online Research Learning

Many of the challenges of online research learning mimic those of all learning online. The differing time zones of different candidates make organising webinars difficult. Most importantly, [encouraging candidate engagement](#) can be a challenge. This is a challenge for all online educators, but arguably more so when candidates are juggling the demands of work, family, and their research supervisors.

Time management, or lack of time, has been found to be the main reason for student attrition and [this applies to research students as well](#). The different challenge for online research students compared with non-research students is supervision. Candidates are juggling the demands of their coursework with the demands their supervisors are making of them to develop their own study. Also, in the same way that [dissatisfaction with supervision](#) can lead to face-to-face Higher Research Degree (HDR) candidates quitting, the same can occur online.

### **Differences of Online Research Learning**

Traditionally, candidates studying on campus have the advantage of day-to-day casual interactions with both fellow candidates and with staff. Research candidates often have desks (or hot desks) co-located and near relevant academics. There is an expectation that they are part of a scholarly community and that they will attend seminars, receive informal feedback, and have casual conversations which are all part of incorporating the candidate into the [academic community](#). Although online learners may be encouraged to engage in similar ways the spatial difference probably makes this less likely. They may not have the same opportunities afforded by being around like-minded people – both staff and other candidates. Working candidates are also often time-poor and may prioritise other tasks over opportunities to connect with staff and other candidates.

### **Advantages of Online Research Learning**

One of the distinct advantages of online research learning is the capacity is [to go back and revisit learning materials](#) throughout the research journey. This not only includes learning materials, but lectures, discussions or Webinars that might not be recorded if conducted face-to-face. This can be valuable as the candidate develops their thinking about the research. Regular online exposure to staff, experts and fellow candidates who live elsewhere is feasible and this can be useful in developing the candidate's thinking.

### **Recommendations**

To help address some of the issues with online research learning and make the most of the advantages it is suggested that:

- [Attempts should be made to facilitate active casual chat between candidates and staff and candidates with candidates](#) and to encourage engagement more generally. This might be through activities like the deliberate use of social media such as WhatsApp, a [formal or informal mentoring scheme](#), online social events and regular opportunities to catch up. The academic's competence in [designing and facilitating online learning](#) may also need to be addressed.
- Recognition should be given [to the social support contexts in which Candidates are embedded](#) and [use of these to support](#) their learning journey should be encouraged.
- Take advantage of the speed and convenience of online learning by [providing quick responses from academics](#), including online discussions.

- Use more tools being developed for online learning – such as [podcasts](#) and interactive activities, as well as different forms of assessment (such as [podcasts](#), [self-assessments](#) and [creative assessments](#)) to encourage candidate engagement.

## Conclusion

Online research degrees create opportunities for candidates who would struggle with meeting the demands of a face-to-face program or who just prefer the flexibility of studying online. It allows higher education institutions such as AIB to engage with candidates who are widely dispersed and to offer a 'boundaryless' learning experience. To optimise the experience for candidates, conscious attention needs to be paid to providing opportunities for interaction with peers and helping candidates develop their own local support systems. Special attention should be paid to the relationship with supervisors and the workload created by being involved in both coursework and developing a study.



### Carlene Boucher

Lecturer, Australian Institute of Business

Carlene has worked at several universities in Australia and has been supervising PhD and DBA candidates for more than thirty years. She has managed post-graduate programs and professional development initiatives for research Supervisors.

Cite this article:

Boucher, C 2023, 'HDR Coursework at a Distance: Lessons from Literature and Experience', *AIB Review*, Issue 10.

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