Foreword

Research in the emerging field of online distance education has, so far, evolved in a somewhat haphazard fashion, consisting largely of an assemblage of contributions made by researchers working on different topics, often in isolation from one another. Olaf Zawacki-Richter and Terry Anderson’s proposal that research in the field should instead be guided by a systematic agenda is therefore both timely and richly deserving praise. This much-needed volume provides practitioners, theorists, and researchers with a comprehensive survey of the state of online distance education as an independent field of inquiry, while also offering a clear orientation for future research. Like early explorers, Zawacki-Richter and Anderson have succeeded in mapping territory that, while not unknown, has remained uncharted. This is a remarkable achievement in a field so very new. Educators are already aware that online distance education is the way of tomorrow, and this book will help to ensure that research in this area becomes a priority.

Readers may be surprised to see that, even in relatively short span of time, research in online distance education has grown to be so multifaceted that the editors have subdivided it into three levels: macro-, meso-, and micro-. In this way, three frames of reference are established that call for different theoretical justifications and research methods. Each frame is characterized by a number of significant typical research themes. These themes were not developed in the abstract, with specific pedagogical goals in mind, but were instead empirically derived from the existing literature by applying the Delphi method.

The achievements of the volume can be understood from a number of perspectives:

(1) Not only does the book present a detailed structure of the field of online distance education and a respective research agenda, but its chapters also demonstrate why the proposed structure is justified.
The volume mirrors the ongoing globalization of education. By incorporating ideas and practical achievements drawn from various institutional settings throughout the world, it facilitates the international collaboration of online distance education researchers.

A volume like this one could only become possible in an era of advanced digitalization. Digitalization facilitated the Delphi study immensely. Using social network analysis techniques, the editors were quickly able to identify research experts in the field of distance education all across the globe and invite them to participate in this project. Digital communications media expedited the exchange of relevant research ideas, issues, approaches, theoretical interpretations, and findings. The research agenda that the editors present in this volume is the result of a collaborative process that occurred at a pace never before experienced.

The essays in the volume stand as proof that distance education can no longer be considered a one-dimensional phenomenon. In the past, laypersons, practitioners, and even specialists in the field often described distance education simply as an approach in which proximity is replaced by distance and spoken dialogue by mediated communication. This overly simple definition lingers in the memory of many people. In contrast, this volume convincingly demonstrates that online distance education is a comprehensive, many-sided process and a multifunctional system. This is a major step forward.

In the same way that, during the 1970s and 1980s, the founding of open universities enhanced the image of distance education, in part through the establishment of centres for the study of educational technology, this book will enhance status of distance education as a legitimate topic of research. No longer will distance education be defined principally in terms of practice; rather, it will be regarded as a field of activity that can be empirically explored, critically analyzed, and theoretically interpreted, as well as one that continues to be fundamentally transformed by the powerful impact of digitalization.

The volume will help to raise the level of professionalism in the field of online distance education, as it will enable practitioners to become familiar with specific research results and research methods. More and more, those working in the field will come to consider their
own activities as teachers, media experts, tutors, and counsellors as akin to scientific processes, which can (and should) be carefully and systematically planned, tested, implemented, and evaluated. This emerging area of educational practice, once represented exclusively by exceptional practitioners, is now also the domain of scholars who are able to subject this practice to scientific scrutiny. Specific theoretical models and hypotheses have already been developed, and, in this volume, empirical research areas are identified.

Perhaps the overriding value of this volume lies, however, in its authors, all of them noted academics who were carefully selected to contribute to the discussion. The chapters they have written, which are often the product of considerable reflection on experience, fit nicely into the described framework, but they also prove that research in the field of online distance education has entered an exciting phase of development. Topics that have too long been neglected—such as costs and other economic considerations, student dropout rates, issues of social justice, the influence of cultural factors and the need for sensitivity to those factors, provisions for faculty professional development, and the role of learner communities—are here given close and thoughtful attention.

In addition, the research agenda outlined in this book reminds researchers, who are still in the habit of putting technology first, of the significant pedagogical, social, psychological, economic, and political influences on distance education. Not only should researchers be fully aware of these influences, but they should in fact give them priority. The proposed agenda recognizes that obvious gaps in the existing research must be filled.

Together, the scholarly contributions collected in this volume offer an open and thorough assessment of the present state of the art of online distance education research. For that reason, they are bound to provoke international discussion. At the same time, they set an international standard and set of objectives that present and future distance education researchers will need to meet.

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A few personal concluding remarks may be added. As a pedagogue with no experience in distance education whatsoever, I became aware of and interested in correspondence education, which was already going on in the late 1950s. Since then, I have witnessed four periods in the evolution
of distance education research. The first was characterized by the complete absence of research. As an educational format, correspondence education was unknown both to my colleagues and within my academic discipline, and pedagogical compendia were silent on the subject, apparently unaware even of its existence. And, indeed, no scholarly research was devoted to this form of education—with the unique and praiseworthy exception of Charles A. Wedemeyer, an outstanding distance education expert and a shining visionary and pioneer.

The second period was characterized by the dominance of comparative studies. As someone who has been attending the conferences of the International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE) since 1965, I often had the chance to listen to Gayle Childs, who frequently reported on studies that compared conventional, face-to-face classroom instruction to correspondence education. At that time, the leading practitioners of correspondence education were preoccupied, if not obsessed, with the idea that it was absolutely necessary to prove that the two formats were equal with regard to student performance. This was methodically questionable and pedagogically impossible, as these two formats are structurally very different and should therefore be expected to produce different outcomes. However, these comparative studies were the modest beginning of distance education research—without a guiding theory and without deeper insights into its specific educational possibilities.

Then, in the 1970s, a third period emerged, which was characterized by a focus on educational technology. During this period, technological frameworks and methods dominated distance education research, to the clear disadvantage of significant pedagogical issues. The fourth period was marked by the advent of online education. Only now, after having experienced these developmental phases, have distance education experts become conscious of the full complexity of the format and its multifarious aspects.

Looking back at the stark absence of academic research in the 1950s and at its modest beginning in the 1960s, we become keenly aware of the enormous progress achieved in online distance education in a relatively short time. The research agenda presented by Olaf Zawacki-Richter and Terry Anderson reminds us of this remarkable development and outstanding accomplishment.

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