

Business education goes the distance as digital disruption reaches the classroom

With a new generation of digital natives now launching their careers in the workplace, executive learning across all formats and disciplines is increasingly being remoulded and going online, as learners look to take the greatest possible control and convenience from the increasing learning and development opportunities open to them.

As the corporate world goes deeper into digital business transformation, with technologies such as AI, chatbots, Cloud, blockchain and the Internet of Things being adopted rapidly, business education is increasingly mirroring the workplace. Employees now commonly work flexibly, remotely, and collaborate and communicate with colleagues and third parties using corporate networks and communications tools, their own devices and apps. Technology really is becoming second-nature as life is lived online, offline and in a blended format.

You could call it the gamification (or Netflixisation as it has been called) of business education for employers and there can be an element of this with corporate academies and third party learning providers, with on-demand content, competitive elements, and instant gratification.

For universities, MOOCs (Mass Open Online Courses) have demonstrated the potential—and potential demand—for opening the classroom to the world, and business education has extended and refined this to create new learning opportunities beyond the campus for busy working professionals in mid-career, unable or unwilling to take a break. For many leading university brands, this approach could support their transnational education aspirations and make learning content available to international learners who would normally not be reachable. This all comes with the assurance of the academic (university or business school) brand reputation, academic and other accreditations, faculty, tried and tested content, and the clear credibility and value of the qualification.

Online distance is the ultimate learning convenience, unconstrained by time or place for working professionals who may not have the luxury or the time to take a break from a busy career. It may also be a more desirable format for some business people who may find it difficult to travel to a campus or regional centre for face-to-face workshops, for example.

Distance learning or online-only courses are increasingly offered by many of the world's top business schools, which are using their international brand recognition, accreditation and quality assurance to attract high quality students, especially from overseas, outside their home markets. Technology developments are helping to drive this with a more immersive and classroom-like (but still virtual) experience, richer content along with more opportunities for deeper online interaction. Some schools may develop their own online platforms to deliver the learning content.

For students, such courses will demand the same commitment, discipline and time management as blended learning/campus programmes, but for time-poor students it could

be a great option. Technology can facilitate student collaboration and networking, student work groups and forums, faculty-led activities, and replicate a global classroom environment in real time.

But it is not just about the quality of the tech and top online programmes needed to offer benefits beyond the programme for business learners, such as careers services, research resources, other local networking opportunities with other students and alumni.

From an employer perspective, online is not an issue because it's all about the candidate or individual who has completed a demanding programme alongside the demands of work, family and life. It perhaps has a special appeal for people with young families, who may need greater flexibility and control over study time and those who cannot travel easily due to cultural or other issues.

Distance is no object to high-quality learning and the model is developing to support the lifelong learning approach that will increasingly help define successful careers in the future.

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