Virtually like the real thing

Technology
Can the latest equipment make remote study as good as being there — or even better, asks Ian Wylie

It would not be spotted in an ordinary lecture theatre but Justin Zimmerman’s tool is enough to attract the professor’s attention. Left hand and right hand don’t cross clearly on a large TV screen near a seat in the “WOW room”, a virtual classroom for online students at De Montfort University in Leicester.

The WOW room does not just mimic a face-to-face environment — it is a function of where the professor is able to walk around and express ideas in three dimensions. The professor can touch objects, zoom on the slides and even have a discussion with other students while walking around.

“I think it’s a fantastic facility,” says Mr Zimmerman, a participant in an online MBA programme. “We’ve got some great ideas for how we can use it. It’s great for breaking down ideas and making people think about things.”

The WOW room has been designed as a virtual classroom and can be used to deliver formal classroom teaching sessions or for more informal discussions.

“By doing this, you’re delivering a very sophisticated virtual learning environment,” says Mr Zimmerman. “It is a game changer for the future of education.”

The WOW room is part of the university’s investment in technology and the growing role of online education. The university’s MBAs can be taken by students from anywhere in the world, albeit for different reasons in different countries, says Matt Robb, managing director of FurtherEd, an education industry consultancy.

“Online education is really transformative and offers a lot of advantages,” says Mr Robb. “For example, it offers freedom, flexibility and affordability.”

Mr Robb says that online education is becoming a means for business schools to reach overseas students prevented from studying on campus by distance from their home countries. “We have got a lot of students from India and China. They don’t have access to the same opportunities on campus, so we provide them with an alternative,” he says.

The WOW room is just one of the technological advancements at the university. Other developments include interactive whiteboards, virtual reality headsets and a 3D printer.

Mr Robb says that the WOW room is just one example of how business schools are embracing new technologies to make online classrooms not just mimic a face-to-face environment but also improve the learning experience for students.

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## The Financial Times Online MBA Ranking 2017

### The Top 20 Online MBA Programmes

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### Key to the Table
- **Rank in 2017**
- **Class of 2017 (ranked schools)**
- **Current salary**
- **Most and least popular classes**
- **Satisfaction with online delivery**

### Analysis

The top 100 online MBA programmes for the 2017 Financial Times rankings included the following key points:

- The top three popular classes among students were: Marketing, Finance, and Strategy.
- The least popular classes were: Entrepreneurship, Innovation, and Sustainability.
- The top three most popular courses were: Big Data Analytics, Machine Learning, and Business Ethics.
- The least popular courses were: Sustainable Business Practices, Blockchain, and Cryptocurrency.

### Methodology

- **Schools are rated according to data gathered from schools and students.**
- **Top two fends on fast-rising US challenge.**

### How the FT’s 2017 ranking of online MBAs was researched and compiled

The FT’s ranking of online MBAs was based on a comprehensive evaluation of various criteria, including:

- **Academic contact**
- **Career progress**
- **Online delivery**
- **Programme diversity**
- **Idea generation**
- **Additional notes**

### Data and Rankings

- **Value for money**
- **Graduation salary**
- **Programme fee**
- **FT research rank**
- **Female students (%)**
- **International faculty (%)**
- **International mobility**

### Key Points

- **Value for money**
  - FT research rank: Calculated by dividing average alumni income three years after graduation by the total cost.
  - Female students (%): Percentage of full-time female graduates.
  - International faculty (%): Percentage of faculty who have taught outside of their country of citizenship.

### Overall Rankings

- **Financial Times Online MBA Ranking 2017**
- **The top 20 online MBA programmes**
- **Career progress**
- **Online delivery**
- **Programme diversity**
- **Idea generation**
- **Additional notes**

### Footer

- **Financial Times Online MBA Ranking 2017**
- **The top 20 online MBA programmes**
- **Career progress**
- **Online delivery**
- **Programme diversity**
- **Idea generation**
- **Additional notes**

### Information Sources

- **FT research rank**
- **Female students (%)**
- **International faculty (%)**
- **International mobility**

### Additional Notes

- **Includes data for the current year and the one two years preceding where available.**

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[View the full report on the Financial Times website](https://www.ft.com/content/32c90dfe-0f24-11e7-8486-f05f8245b943)
Interview: Rick Levin looks to life-long learning and direct sales to companies, says Hannah Kuchler

Rick Levin, chief executive of Coursera, says there is an opportunity for big tech companies to help bolster courses and learning on the online platform. He believes business schools are searching for ways to reach students outside the traditional model of physical classrooms.

**How has your role changed since leaving Wharton?**

I think the biggest change is that in the last five years, the business school industry has evolved. It wasn’t that many years ago that big tech companies were not part of the conversation. They weren’t part of the conversation at all, really, in any way. So I think what I’ve seen is a transition to a new conversation and a new dialogue.

**What do you see as the benefits for business schools in this area?**

There are several things going on. First of all, there is this great wave of increased interest in lifelong learning. People are looking for opportunities to learn throughout their entire careers. They are looking for opportunities to retrain. There are also new models of education. People want new models that are different from traditional universities.

**What might the future hold?**

I think the future is going to be much more about the partnership between business schools and technology companies. It’s going to be about creating these new lifelong learning programs. It’s about using the technology to actually deliver the education.

**What kind of partnership would you like to see?**

I think it would be great to see a partnership where the business school provides the program and the business provides the platform. They would be working together to deliver the education.

**What kind of courses do you think would be most effective in a lifelong learning program?**

Courses that are flexible, that are online, that are mobile, that are personalized. Courses that are adaptive, that can change based on the needs of the learner. Courses that are interactive, that involve real-world problems.

**What advice would you give to business schools that are thinking about entering this area?**

I think it’s important to have a clear strategy and a clear business model. It’s also important to have a clear understanding of your audience. You need to know who your customers are and what they want.

**What challenges do you think business schools will face in this area?**

The biggest challenge is going to be making the transition to online learning. It’s going to be about changing the culture of the business school and changing the way they deliver education.

**What do you think the role of business schools will be in the future?**

I think business schools will continue to play an important role in lifelong learning. They will continue to provide the curriculum and the expertise. But they will also work closely with technology companies to deliver the education.

**What do you think the future of business education looks like?**

I think the future of business education is going to be much more about lifelong learning. It’s going to be much more about the partnership between business schools and technology companies. It’s going to be much more about delivering education in a way that is flexible, personalized, and interactive.

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A female-friendly alternative

Gender Some schools have found that the appeal of remote study can be a tool to address imbalance in the sector, writes Sarah Murray

Professionals in general, and women in particular, are increasingly looking to online MBAs as a way of furthering their careers without sacrificing family or work commitments.

According to the QF-UCD report, 25 per cent of students on the full-time course and 30 per cent of students on the online MBA, but account for 52 per cent of all the time-poor, men and women on the online programme.

However, if no steps are taken, it will be "only a temporary fix", says Prof Victoria Hynes, senior associate director of admissions and global education at the University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School.

"The virtual classroom opens doors for the time-poor. It offers a flexible learning experience without relocating. Materials are also downloadable and finished assignments can be submitted whenever you’re ready. It’s about getting an education on your own terms. It’s about you... taking an online MBA rather than a campus programme, or taking an online MBA rather than full-time or executive programmes makes you feel more attractive as she juggles running a business, like managing a start-up, Antrum BioElectric, a regulation advisory business firm, which he plans to launch in the next six months.

"I work in a very aggressive environment", says Prof Picone Chiodo, Warwick Business School’s Distance Learning Director.

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