

# YOUR GUIDE TO **ONLINE LEARNING**



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# Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected universities and business schools around the world, forcing institutions to evolve and move classes and lectures online. Online learning has been growing in recent years but is now poised to become the dominant method of education for millions of students around the world.

The range of available online courses spans from traditional undergraduate and postgraduate university degrees to other accredited diploma programmes. This means your online learning options can include both a short course to fill some time while based at home or a full-time university degree, depending on your needs.

Identifying the right online learning programme for you can be tricky given the vast range of options, which is where this guide will hopefully be useful. The key things to bear in mind initially are to focus on accredited courses from reputable providers.

These could be bricks-and-mortar academic institutions like the University of Oxford or esteemed online learning providers like the Open University, to give two examples.

By keeping these two factors in mind, you can ensure that the online learning programmes you discover and apply to are ones which will have the desired impact on your career and future prospects. So, whether it's for a few months or a few years, let's get started on your journey into the virtual world of online learning.

# How does studying an online degree actually work?

If you've never considered studying an online degree before, you're likely to have questions about how they work – particularly compared to traditional in-person. The table below outlines some of the key similarities and differences you'll find with most online degrees.

Factor	How Is It Different?
Cost	Online programmes typically have low overheads so schools can charge lower tuition fees. However, the average cost is still a significant investment.
Financial aid	While you may not be on-campus, most scholarships and financial aid packages still apply to online students. Check with individual schools for more info.
Class size	Online programmes can mean studying alongside a much larger, more diverse cohort.
Networking	Given you can't meet your peers in person, it's important to use online platforms like Zoom and virtual "breakout rooms" to network and build relationships.
Class structure	Lectures are often asynchronous, meaning you can watch at a time that suits you. Live discussion groups allow you to connect with tutors and other students in real time, similar to an in-person class.
Access to tutors	On-campus programmes typically come with office hours where you can speak one-on-one to your tutors. Online programmes usually replicate this in some form and tutors should be regularly contactable via email and video call.
Required equipment	Access to a university library isn't possible so you may need to buy your own textbooks and reading materials – although some online courses make this information available digitally. You may also need to ensure your computer has certain software installed so that you can attend lectures, take part in group work etc.
Tests	Not all online programmes involve examinations – some will require only coursework and/or group work to be submitted. If you are to sit an exam, you'll normally be able to do this from your home on special software – check with your course provider for more information.



# Pros and Cons of Online Learning

Pros	Cons
<b>Flexibility</b> You can work on your own timetable, without needing to relocate or move abroad.	<b>Self-discipline</b> Ability to work to your schedule requires focus.
<b>Curriculum</b> Top online programmes will offer a curriculum that's near-identical to the in-person equivalent, ensuring you get the knowledge and skills necessary to advance in your career.	<b>Networking</b> Video conferencing can't entirely replace the in-person experience, although some online programmes do include optional meet-ups for their students.
<b>Reputation</b> Employers are increasingly aware of the strength of online learning programmes and the qualification on your CV will impress recruiters.	<b>Tests</b> Taking tests online can be an unusual experience, particularly as it's a more distracting environment.
<b>Urgency</b> Online programmes are often ideal if you're looking for something you can start immediately and/or complete quickly	<b>Feedback</b> Studying online can mean you feel isolated and unable to ask for support from tutors/peers.



# How do I choose my online course

As we mentioned in the introduction, the most important things to check initially when researching online learning programmes is whether they are:

1. Accredited by a recognised body (examples include AMBA, EQUIS and AACSB)
2. Offered by a reputable organisation

However, these are just two factors to consider. When it comes to building your shortlist of possible online programmes, there are other aspects to consider.

## Is the online programme ranked?

Ranking of online programmes isn't as well-established as ranking universities or full-time degree programmes, but there are still some online rankings which can help you establish whether a course is held in high regard. If you are considering studying an MBA, for example, the **QS Online MBA Rankings** features nearly 50 of the world's top online MBA programmes.

Rankings will also provide additional facts and stats about a programme, which may not be available on its website.



### Do you know someone who has studied it?

If you can't confirm the quality of an online programme through an independent ranking, another way to check is to speak to your network and find out if anyone has taken a course which they would recommend.

Or, if you already have a specific programme in mind, try using LinkedIn to reach out to people who have taken the course in the past and ask for their opinion. This will allow you to get an honest perspective on the benefits of each online programme, while also helping you grow your professional network.



### How much does it cost?

Online programmes may cost less than in-person equivalents, but they can still require a significant investment. It's also worth considering that the most expensive course isn't automatically the best either. Make sure you're applying to online programmes which you can afford but also which will offer you value for your money.



### How is the course taught?

We've touched on several online learning methods in this guide, such as asynchronous lectures and virtual "breakout rooms". Everyone has a preferred way of learning and different courses will take a different approach. If you struggle for motivation when working independently, you're going to want to prioritise online programmes which contain a high quantity of group work and online interaction (and vice versa).



### Can my employer sponsor me?

One way of dealing with the costs of an online programme is to ask for your employer to sponsor you. This is likely to only be relevant if the course you wish to take will have a positive impact on your day-to-day work – but is worth exploring as a source of financial aid if the online course provider allows it.





# How to apply to an online programme?

The application process for an online programme is likely to be familiar for anyone who has applied to a traditional undergraduate and postgraduate degree – especially if the online degree is offered by a university or business school.

*As online programmes can often be started at any point in the year, applications tend to be accepted on a rolling basis with multiple start dates throughout the year.*

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However, there are a few key differences to be aware of. As online programmes can often be started at any point in the year, applications tend to be accepted on a rolling basis with multiple start dates throughout the year. So, while some programmes will have an application deadline, many will not. The advantage of this is you can work on your application without the stress of it needing to be completed by a particular time.

The materials required for an online application are again familiar (academic transcripts, cover letter, proof of funds etc.) although some courses – particularly those offered by specialist online providers – may be less thorough. For example, undergraduate-level programmes offered by the Open University require no prior academic qualifications whatsoever.

While some online programmes may include an interview round (usually done over video conference), this is only true for highly selective programmes. MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are designed to include large numbers of people so are less restrictive in their admissions criteria.



# How to study productively at home

Working from home can be a blessing and a curse. The flexibility and comfort of working from home is fantastic, but the lack of routine and the loneliness can leave you feeling quite strained.



## Plan your day

Set an early alarm every day during the regular work week as if you were going to campus and kick-start your day with a to-do list of work that you can tick off as you go.



## Block your social media access

Social media platforms are created to make it easy for you to open and browse them quickly – but at work, this can be detrimental to your productivity if you're feeling a bit bored.

To counteract the ease at which you usually hop onto social media during working hours, remove them from your browser shortcuts and log out of all of your accounts.



## Communicate efficiently online

Email chains can get messy and it's not unheard of to miss an email when your inbox is inundated. So, find other ways to communicate with your fellow students, whether through tools such as Microsoft Teams and Slack or through bespoke software offered by the online learning provider.



## Reach out for help when you need it

Despite the distance, your teachers will always be there to help you, so don't be scared to contact them if you need advice or clarification on your work. Student forums are also a great place to ask important questions about exams, projects and networking, as well as to further interact with your peers. No point wasting time and focus trying to figure things out by yourself!



## Take plenty of breaks

It's easy to get carried away when studying, especially at home, but this doesn't mean you're not allowed downtime. Take a close look at your schedule and add some productive breaks here and there. It can be as simple as giving yourself 10 minutes to drink a cup of coffee or put on a load of laundry – as long as you're resting, you'll benefit from it.



## Practice self-care and exercise when you can

Believe it or not, studies show that exercise can boost cognitive function, memory recall and brain function. In short, working out isn't only good for your body, it's also beneficial for your mind.

No one is expecting you to become a triathlon champion overnight, especially if exercise isn't normally your thing. Instead, opt for a walk outside (even 30 minutes will do) or an at-home workout.

# What is studying online like?

*"The quality of teaching has been superb, and the professor's ability to both communicate complex subjects and facilitate engaging debate through a non-traditional online classroom format has exceeded all of my expectations.*

*My fellow students come from nearly every continent and every industry, so there's not a traditional or common approach in the cohort's background. I work in consumer goods in the UK. Learning through debate from colleagues who work in engineering in Australia, government in the US, or even interior design has helped expand my horizons to new industries and cultures.*

*UCL look for students keen to learn and foster a culture of collaboration so that we rise as a collective rather than compete with each other. Even though we're often on different continents, we've been able to build personal relationships and have learnt on each other for support in so many ways."*



Jessica Cook  
Online MBA- UCL School of Management

*"The EMIB programme enables me to take courses in French and in English (two different tracks), practicing both languages, having access to a wider choice of courses and conducting group work with different people."*



Isabelle Malique-Park  
Executive Master's in International Business – ESCP Business School

# Additional resources



If you're looking for additional information on topics such as scholarships, rankings, online learning and more, then take a look at our other free guides and tools:

- [Rankings 101: How to use rankings to choose what to study](#)
- [Your student visa guide: Top 10 study destinations](#)
- [Your complete guide to applying for an MBA](#)
- [A comparative guide: business masters vs MBA](#)
- [MBA salary trends: What employers want](#)
- [MBA skills trends: What employers want](#)
- [Your complete guide to applying for a masters degree](#)
- [Our favourite global scholarships and how to apply for them](#)
- [Your ultimate guide to choosing a university](#)
- [Top 10 students cities - Everything you need to know](#)
- [GMAT or GRE: which test should I take?](#)
- [MBA ROI calculator](#)

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If you're looking to attend a virtual or in-person event in your city, head over to our university and business school events pages and see what events we have coming up.



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