Hologram lecturers thrill students at trailblazing UK university

Any university lecturer will tell you that luring students to a morning lecture is an uphill struggle. But even the most hungover fresher would surely be enticed by a physics lesson from Albert Einstein or a design masterclass from Coco Chanel. This could soon be the reality for British students, as some universities start to beam in guest lecturers from around the globe using the same holographic technology that is used to bring dead or retired singers back to the stage. Loughborough University, the first in Europe to explore the technology's applications, plans to use it to bring in sports scientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to teach fashion students how to create immersive shows, and to test management students on navigating tricky business situations. Prof Vikki Locke, the director of undergraduate studies at Loughborough business school, said students "absolutely love" the technology and have been begging for selfies with the gadget. They would prefer "a guest speaker from industry beaming into a classroom to a 2D person on the wall", she added. Zoom calls, she said, led students to "feel like they were watching TV … there's a distance. A holographic image is a lot more engaging and real to them." The technology is slated to be formally introduced into the curriculum in 2025 after a year of experimentation. The box-based holographic units are sold by LA-based Proto, whose clients include companies such as BT and IBM, where it is used in meetings to reduce the need for corporate travel. Proto also works with the fashion retailer H&M in Stockholm in making interactive product displays. David Nussbaum, who founded Proto four years ago after working on dead-celebrity holograms, said his company could soon bring some of the 20th century's greatest thinkers back from the dead. He said: "Proto has the technology to project an image of Stephen Hawking, or anybody, and make it look like he's really there. We can hook it up to books, lectures, social media – anything he was attached to, any question, any interaction with him. An AI Stephen Hawking would look like him, sound like him and interact like it was him. "It's awe-inspiring, it's jaw-dropping, I've been in shock at how amazing the interactions are. AI is part of our life, whether people like it or not." He added that his firm's ambition was to prove "you shouldn't have to be an eccentric millionaire or a celebrity to have a hologram". Gary Burnett, a professor of digital creativity at Loughborough University, said: "Different immersive technologies and AI are the new forms of literacy. Students need to understand what it means to use those, to be in those worlds, to experience them, to interact … and these are all things they're going to need for their future careers." The university's pro-vice-chancellor, Prof Rachel Thomson, said the technology could help the university achieve its sustainability strategy by reducing the need to fly in guest speakers and by facilitating international research collaborations, as well as by reducing the amount of material used by students building prototypes in engineering, design and the creative arts. They could also allow a

lecturer to display a complicated piece of equipment such as an engine more easily than via a video call. Nussbaum said businesses and large institutions such as universities were the first step in his firm's plan, but within the next 18 months he hopes to roll out smaller units that cost under $1,000 (£800), which would beam out a shrunken image that he likens to "Wonkavision" in Roald Dahl's Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. The technology's AI capabilities mean an avatar can be created resembling anyone in the world, he added, though he noted that this might entail legal complications.