

LIVERPOOL'S ONLINE MBA

# Internet helps ensure quality

The university finds that its online courses are in some ways easier to run than traditional ones, reports **James Wilson**

From his office in Liverpool University, it is a straightforward task for Alan Southern to oversee any aspects of the institution's online MBA programme.

A few mouse clicks and Mr Southern, deputy director of the university's e-learning unit with responsibility for the MBA programme, has access to strings of electronic exchanges between any students and their instructors.

Mr Southern can check the quality of coursework and tuition in these interactive classrooms, and resolve any problems.

This is just as easy to do as if the far-flung participants were in a classroom round the corner.

This ability to monitor quality is integral to Liverpool's claim to deliver an online MBA that is as thoroughly taught as a campus-based programme.

Indeed, Peter Taylor, director of the management school at the university, argues that keeping track of quality when everything is logged electroni-

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cally is in some ways easier than when there is face-to-face tuition.

"You get a record of each participant's entire participation. That is impossible to replicate on campus," he says.

Mr Southern adds: "There is no hiding place for students, or instructors. Students have to make a contribution."

Liverpool says that it was the first UK university to deliver an entire programme via e-learning.

Its first online masters programme was an MSc in IT, but the e-learning unit was quickly expanded to include an online MBA, part of the manage-

ment school that the university opened at the start of the decade.

Prof Taylor says: "Our management school came late to the market and one of the key questions was how to differentiate ourselves. One way to do that was to focus on e-learning."

Whereas Liverpool's campus MBA programme has about 100 students, there are 1,000 studying a similar course in the online world.

Students take four core "modules": on managing people, resources, the environment and change. These are supplemented with optional courses or specialisations in marketing or finance and accounting. Most students complete the programme in about two years, with the university setting an upper limit of four years.

The MBA costs about £14,400 and teaching is carried out in groups of 12-16, with what Mr Southern says is lots of interaction among students and between students and instructors.

Indeed, staff make a sharp distinction between online learning and other forms of distance learning. "Traditional distance learning does not involve communication with instructors or other students. Everything we do involves communication," says Mr Southern.

Liverpool's partner is Laureate Online Education, a private US company, whose staff have more day-to-day contact with students than the faculty at Liverpool do.

Laureate provides administration and technical support, handles early-stage recruitment into the programme and employs programme managers to help students resolve straightforward concerns. About 120 people are involved in teaching the programme.

But the university has final control of academic issues, including assessments of instructors' teaching standards and the syllabus. Staff such as Mr Southern monitor online classes.

Paul Leng, director of Liverpool's e-learning unit, says: "If it does not work out with an instructor, we say so and they do not use them again."

Prof Leng says the university had an institutional aim to be a leader in e-learning but was afraid it would be "pulled down" if things went wrong.



Ad van Lier from the Netherlands receives his Liverpool MSc in person, after studying for it remotely

"We decided that what was really important was to have an academically sound programme and a good teaching paradigm.

"It was absolutely vital to put in place a rigorous quality assurance process. We want to be fireproof."

Minakshi Sondhi, commercial development manager at London City Airport is a recent graduate. She says Liverpool's online MBA programme suited her need for a course to fit around a busy personal and professional life.

"A lot of part-time courses did not give me the degree of flexibility I needed. Liverpool seemed ideal. You can drive your own programme and stop when there is something in your life that needs attention," she says.

"The idea of the interactive classrooms was intriguing, but it was one of the best bits of the course. At the start, the online aspect was a bit daunting

but the introductory sessions make it easy.

"People might have a perception that it is somehow false because it is online but I would beg to differ. The content and the amount of work we had to do was incredible. They are awfully demanding.

"They kept us motivated and focused with very quick deadlines to keep you going."

Unsurprisingly, the online MBA attracts a more diverse and international group of students than the campus programme • although the only time many of them meet is at a graduation ceremony in Liverpool.

The average age of students, 38, is higher than on the campus programme, reflecting the way a flexible course attracts older students with greater personal and career commitments. Prof Taylor comments: "It is not just study

in the comfort of your own home, it is study in the security of your own job."

The chance for students to encounter a vast range of international experience is also put forward as part of the appeal of the course.

Ms Sondhi says: "One of the students in my first class was a lady from Mali running her own business. She did not have any educational background but loads of experience and she was incredibly insightful."

While the technology used is likely to evolve, Liverpool has so far stuck to a relatively simple level essentially involving e-mail - so as to offer equality of opportunity to students in less connected places.

Mr Southern points out that Liverpool's online model is "infinitely scalable" and nowhere near the peak of student interest, in contrast to campus-based business schools. In future, there

are ideas to expand the number of online programmes and consideration of more "blending" of campus and online courses.

Prof Taylor says: "Market research tends to confirm that on-campus and online are distinct markets. But that does not necessarily mean that you could not do some blending." There would also be advantages for staff career development in exposing them to the online model.

With hindsight, says Prof Taylor, he would have "worried less at the outset" about setting up the online programme. "This was new territory. I had always done programmes on campus and been able to look students in the eye," he says. "I asked myself how it was going to work with someone tapping a keyboard on the other side of the world. But as it has developed, my confidence has grown."