

A virtual world of opportunities

If you're in full-time work and need flexibility, how about an online course, asks **Jessica Moore**

Anyone who saw Stuart Baggs 'The Brand' squirm his way into the semi-finals of *The Apprentice* in December knows that, in Lord Sugar's boardroom at least, the gift of the gab can get you a long way. In real-world business, however, it may not always be necessary. A growing number are realising that it is possible to gain the required acumen without engaging in the cut and thrust of face-to-face negotiation.

Emma McFarlane is among them. She is studying for a BA in international business and management, delivered by Bournemouth University, and will complete her course entirely online: "I can relate the work I'm doing to the real environment, even though it's distance learning."

McFarlane, who was originally from St Helens, Merseyside, left school after A-levels and worked her way through the ranks to a management role at a marketing communications company in Leeds.

"I was ready to get out of education and into work," she remembers. "But years later, when I had my son, it was a golden opportunity to get some academic skills to back up my experience." At 36, she is now completing the first year of her degree. Online learning suits her lifestyle: "We're living in Qatar, but we don't know how long we're going to be here or where we're going to be next. The online course works well for me because no matter where I end up in the world, I can still do it."

Kaplan is an organisation that delivers online business degrees in partnership with the University of Essex, as well as on-line professional business courses. "Our core market is people in mid-to-late thirties, who tend to be in full-time work," says their website developer Daniel Todd. The number of part-time students studying Kaplan's online business foundation degrees and BA top-up courses is growing year on year, and they are consequently looking to widen the number of online programmes they offer. There is "an undoubted demand for online delivery", they say.

"Our online business courses usually require about 10 hours' input a week," notes Todd. "Some people manage to put more in, depending on their commitments at home and work, but it is very flexible; that's the whole premise of the courses."

It is certainly crucial to McFarlane. She typically dedicates 12 to 15 hours a week to her studies. "I feel confident that I'm gaining the right skills for a real work environment," she says.

Meanwhile, Ashridge Business School is taking online education to a new level, recently launching 'Virtual Ashridge'. Tony Sheehan, director of learning services, explains: "If you think about what's happened to the web in recent years, in terms of research - Google, Amazon, eBay - we're exposed to wonderful technology at home, and it's a revolution in terms of the way in which we can connect to learning online. A virtual format allows knowledge to be customised to organisational learning frameworks, and to respond to individual learning styles and needs."

A number of Virtual Ashridge programmes are for professional development, and participating business people are encouraged to read broadly around the topics of study. "Rather than saying, 'Here's your content, go and read and browse', we suggest related resources as students work through that is very tightly related to the document, video or audio that they're currently reviewing. It's teaching and learning at a more personal level."

This is particularly relevant in the realm of business, Sheehan says: "Nowadays, everything is interconnected - so strategy has to relate to marketing and finance and so on. Giving students rich signposts to external links gives them a rounded business knowledge and a deeper, more relevant and useable understanding."

The benefits of online and distance learning are many. "It saves time, it saves carbon. Part of the rush towards virtual is the idea of getting more for less," says Sheehan. "People expect quality education from home. One can achieve that with discussion forums, telephone, screen sharing, Skype, web conferencing, video conferencing - there is a range of channels to make virtual learning engaging, and less lonely than it was five years ago," he concludes.

"Any reasonable laptop will have everything you need to study online," agrees McFarlane. "And the technical help that you get from university staff is really good."

After the humiliating series of interviews that saw Baggs ejected from *The Apprentice* and dubbed "a blagger", perhaps he would do well to join those championing the virtual business model.



Ashridge Business School has launched 'Virtual Ashridge' (above) for individuals to customise their course

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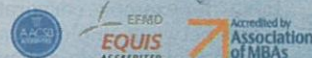
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INSPIRING LEARNING

'ONE OF THE MAIN BENEFITS IS THAT THIS COURSE IS VERY FLEXIBLE'

Teresa Garnett, 51, started her distance-learning MBA with the Edinburgh Business School in 2009.

"My life was going through a period of change. At the age of 49, I took redundancy from my job as a project manager. Then, while I was looking for my next job, my husband died very suddenly. So I decided to do something different. Studying gave me a new focus.

I didn't know if it would work out, so I didn't want to commit to doing an MBA full time. When I applied to

my distance-learning courses, I was living in Edinburgh, but was thinking about moving to the south of France. I wanted to know that I would be able to continue studying no matter where I happened to be.

One of the main benefits of this course is that it's very flexible. For example, I had been planning to do an exam in December, but I moved to France shortly before then, so I decided to defer. I'm now doing it in June. I will take that exam in Edinburgh, but I could have chosen to sit it in France.

More generally, too, it's up to the individual how long your course takes you and how many hours you put in each week, as long as you complete it within the set time frame. I'm aiming for around three years.

The only possible downside of a distance learning course is that you need to be really self-motivated.

The course textbooks are very comprehensive. They're mainly there for old-fashioned people who still like to look at a book - the information is available on the internet as well."