

A good investment in bad times

In a recession, distance learning becomes more popular, writes Simon Midgley



Distance learning has attracted more than 33,000 people to UK schools

In a recession, enrolment on distance learning MBAs rises as people realise that they have to hone their professional skills to remain employable. Heriot-Watt University's Edinburgh Business School has experienced a rise in the number of its distance learning MBA students of 15 per cent per annum over the past five years.

"People think it's time to invest in their own skills and expertise," says Alick Kitchin, the school's business director. "The MBA market is counter-cyclical. I know from my 20 years' experience that in recessionary times people enrol on independent MBAs."

Currently more than 33,000 people from all over the world are studying for an MBA by distance learning with UK business schools. In the largest programme in the country, run by Edinburgh Business School, there are 9,800 distance learning MBA students, 5,000 of whom are completely independent learners. The remainder have some contact from international centres run by partner institutions around the world.

Students come from 165 countries and most are taught and assessed in English, but some are also taught and assessed in Chinese, Russian, Spanish and Arabic.

"The average age of our students is 34," Kitchin says. "We set out to build a programme with the flexibility to meet the needs of working professionals who are fairly busy and stressed in their lives and are interested in fitting study around their work and home.

"There are a lot of people in their

thirties who have realised that they need to understand finance, accounting, people-management skills and the like, and therefore do our MBA. They can study when, where and as they like over any length of time. They can take the subjects in the order in which they wish to study them. They can move jobs or countries and take their study with them and we can set up exam centres anywhere in the world on demand."

Other providers of distance learn-

ing MBAs include the Open University, the University of Leicester School of Management, Manchester Business School, Henley Business School, Warwick Business School, Durham Business School, Bradford University's School of Management and Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen.

The advantage of studying for an MBA part-time is that the students do not have to take 18 months off work or pay the often very high fees for full-time courses.

The downside, perhaps, is that they spend more time working on their own than they would if they were on a full-time programme.

Distance learning courses are often the only option for middle managers trying to deepen their understanding of the theoretical framework of the way they conduct business.

Such students, however, are more likely to drop out of distance learning programmes than full or part-time executive MBA programmes because of the high degree of self-discipline and self-motivation that is required.

Last year *The Economist* looked at 13 distance learning programmes and rated the University of Florida's Internet MBA and the International Executive MBA offered by the IE Business School in Spain, as being excellent.

It also rated the programmes offered by Arizona's Thunderbird School of Global Management, Indiana University's Kelley School of Business and the Euro*MBA, delivered by a consortium of European business schools, as "good".

Learning verve

Roberta Thomson, director of product transformation for Pearson, the publishing company, was the Open University's MBA student of the year in 2011.

A University of Oxford classics graduate, she studied for her MBA from 2005 to 2010 while working for the company.

"My initial motivation was more about career progression than anything else," Thomson, 36, says. "I wanted to get formal training in business management but as soon as I started the MBA my enthusiasm for learning was reignited. I was always keen to do the MBA in parallel with work, because I felt that the power and purpose of an MBA is about combining theory and practice.

"It was exciting. It did have its frustrations — and challenges, obviously. But in terms of the content it covered and the balance of traditional management theory with some of the more future-facing themes and topics, it worked very well.

"I feel that it has made me a better manager and leader. The course focused on three main aspects: developing myself as an individual and leader; supporting my team; and supporting organisational development.

"It was heavily concept-based and there was a lot of theory to get through. It was intellectually stimulating but the real power comes from applying that to work. I am really grateful to the OU for the opportunity."

SIMON MIDGLEY