



# Quality and Accountability in the Online Business Education Environment

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*Online courses, often considered low-quality alternatives to traditional in-person courses, have become necessities for all learning during the pandemic. Whether this trend continues in postpandemic times depends on how we enhance the online learning experience.*

Online education has gained popularity in business schools in recent years as technology advances and student schedules demand more flexibility. The trend has grown exponentially

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since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and is now the norm for students, instructors, and parents. By now, most of us know how to navigate Zoom or Google Meet as well as various online connecting tools such as Microsoft Teams and Discord.

The principle of distance learning has been around for many decades, with one of the first examples being the use of radio to deliver courses to students. In 1937, schools in Chicago delivered classes via radio broadcasting for a couple of weeks during the polio epidemic.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the effectiveness and structure, the remote learning format has existed for a longer time than most would

readily know. With advanced technology and greater access to and speed of the Internet, the capability and perception of distance learning has evolved over time. Group learning and individualized lessons became available as the use of the Internet melded into our daily lives. The sophistication of remote learning has developed from a one-way mass broadcasting to an interactive environment,

facilitating a more personalized learning experience.

### THE POTENTIAL AND CONCERNS OF ONLINE LEARNING

The most significant advantage of remote learning is asynchrony, which improves accessibility by overcoming not only the space barrier but also the time barrier. Based on the quadrant that categorizes the types of new market-creating service innovations,<sup>2</sup> asynchronous online education fits into the “controllable convenience” market. The categorization implies that the consumers (students) have control over the service delivery, and the service is optimized to maximize the convenience of the

students’ completion of online courses are the course content and the interaction with the instructor.

### THE RISE OF ONLINE COURSES IN BUSINESS SCHOOLS AND BEST PRACTICES

Understandably, the early versions of online business courses were primarily based on prerecorded, asynchronous course materials. It often seemed that the instructor pressed a button, and the course ran automatically. Business schools have invested heavily in online education in recent years to counter negative perceptions and improve the quality of online business education. This development and expan-

course development companies to design higher quality courses. Instructional designers are hired to support faculty in developing the online courses. The current trend of online courses is to include synchronous segments in the online classes. It is challenging to structure online classes completely synchronous because it limits one of the most critical advantages of online courses: flexibility. Nonetheless, a partially synchronous format has been proven beneficial for the course participants as students feel more connected to their instructor and fellow classmates. This synchronous segment of the course can take different forms: 1) a course can include several synchronous online sessions in which the instructor teaches live or 2) a course may offer a residency portion where the online students take part of the class on campus (see Table 1 for an overview of online course structures).

Overall, it is imperative for an online instructor to increase the number of touch points with the students. In addition to synchronous sessions or residencies, this can be achieved via discussion boards, feedback videos, virtual office hours, frequent announcements, or regular email notifications. The goal of online course design is to make its quality comparable to onsite classes. To provide an excellent online course experience, business schools need to offer a consistent class structure across courses, a student-centered environment, technical and instructional student support 24/7, and timely and constructive feedback.<sup>6</sup> The argument is supported by our analysis of online course evaluations where we identified two main areas of student criticism centered around timely/useful feedback from the instructor (or the lack thereof) and clear organization of course materials and assignments. Thus, it is essential for a business school to

- › develop an online program environment that uses the same

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consumers. Synchronous online education falls into the category of “respectful access.” The service is designed in a way that the provider (instructor) appreciates the consumers’ presence and delivers its service in a way that minimizes consumers’ potential predicaments. With its opportunity to create new markets for potential consumers by expanding accessibility and convenience, some researchers expect that online learning will be the future paradigm of education.<sup>3</sup> This growing interest in online education led business schools to expand investment in the development of online courses and programs.

In the development of online courses in business schools, the essential task was transforming the public perception that online courses are low quality and impersonal. Extant research found that online education is often considered substandard and the dropout rate is considerably higher. A survey by Hone and El Said<sup>4</sup> reveals that the most crucial factors affecting the

sion process has accelerated in recent months due to the pandemic. For instance, online courses were considered an effective way to educate part-time students pre-COVID-19 because the majority of part-time students are full-time professionals and select online courses to work on the course materials at their own pace. However, online learning has expanded to full-time students as they also have benefited from high-quality virtual courses. Although many schools are still experiencing the residual negative perception of online education causing students to request lower tuition,<sup>5</sup> the quality of online courses has increased remarkably in the last decade as reputable business schools have entered into the competitive online part-time business education market.

The evolution and variety of formats for online courses in business schools have taken shape through schools’ expert teams or educational partners. Many business schools consult with online

course structure throughout its programs

- › train the instructors on how to design an easily navigable online course
- › train the instructors to provide constructive feedback in a timely manner
- › provide the distance learners access to the school's resources (for example, library, career development services, and advising)
- › build 24/7 student and instructor support for the online classes.

We also must create an educational environment of morale and accountability,

which are the most crucial ingredients for generating high-quality classes. We need meaningful interaction, not simply the capability of it. We have seen cases where instructors came late to the online class, engaged in family activities during the class, or failed to prepare course materials properly. We may argue that those events are isolated cases, which only apply to a particular instructor or classroom. What we need to ponder is how those events will shape the students' expectations and, further, their behavior in online classes. Frequent tardiness would be considered reasonable and playing games or engaging in family activities during class

might be regarded as acceptable. If an instructor cannot show dedication and passion for teaching in the online environment, then the class may become dreadful to enthusiastic students or even toxic to the students' motivation. Students experiencing a lack of structure or preparedness from teachers at any level could then implicate the entire online learning model going forward and reinforce negative perceptions of online learning. The instructors' accountability is very important to justify the hefty tuition in higher education. As faculty members in higher education, we must deliver meaningful interaction with the students, achieve a

**TABLE 1.** The different formats of online courses in business schools.

Online course format	Key characteristics	Key advantages	Key disadvantages
Asynchronous online course with access to an instructor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Course materials and lectures are prerecorded</li> <li>– Instructor is available for questions via email and office hours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– High level of flexibility for students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Students don't receive immediate answers to questions</li> <li>– Not much interaction between instructor and student</li> </ul>
Asynchronous online course without access to an instructor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Course materials and lectures are prerecorded</li> <li>– No access to an instructor (self-learning environment)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Cost efficient for the school</li> <li>– High level of flexibility for students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Students don't have the opportunity to ask an instructor if they have questions</li> <li>– No student/instructor interaction</li> </ul>
Asynchronous online course with synchronous sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Most course materials and lectures are prerecorded</li> <li>– There are short live-classes on a regular basis (for example, once every two weeks or three or four times during a semester)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Relatively flexible for students</li> <li>– More interaction between instructor and students than in other asynchronous course formats</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Less flexibility for students than in asynchronous formats without synchronous sessions</li> <li>– Video conferencing software required that enables live teaching online</li> </ul>
Asynchronous online course with live residencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Course materials and lectures before and after the residency are prerecorded</li> <li>– Students meet for two to three days on campus for in-person class sessions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– In-person interaction between the instructor and students during the residency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Students have to travel to campus</li> <li>– Difficult format for programs that have international students</li> </ul>
Synchronous online course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Live classes taught remotely</li> <li>– All students attend the class remotely</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Live interaction between students and the instructor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Less flexibility for students because they have to attend live classes at predefined times</li> </ul>
Hybrid synchronous online course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Live class taught in a classroom</li> <li>– Some students attend classes live in the classroom; some students attend classes live from a remote location</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Flexibility for students to attend the class in-person or remotely from home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– It is difficult for an instructor to teach a class with some students in the classroom and others joining the class remotely</li> </ul>


quality for online classes that compares to in-person classes, and provide various avenues through which students can interact with fellow students and their instructor.

### CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

Besides stressing the importance of quality, meaningful interaction, and accountability of both instructor and students, it is critical to understand the advantages and limitations of an online course. A key advantage of online courses is that it does not require a physical classroom. This leads to a significant saving for business schools and has the potential to increase the maximum capacity of students. However, some restrictions make online education more complex. In recent months, it has become apparent that there are more privacy restrictions in online classes than previously expected (based on Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act regulations). As most institutions use video conferencing tools to conduct classes, the most effective way to create active in-class interactions is to ask all students to turn on their cameras. However, some universities do not allow recordings of classes due to privacy concerns, and teachers must find alternative ways to assess participation that counts toward course grades. Considering how recorded classes further assist the students' learning in some cases, we may experience the incongruity of the rules.

The major disadvantage of online business education is the lack of personal interaction. In online classrooms, we miss "hallway" conversations that naturally occur in onsite classes, such as 5-min chats before or after class with our students about course content or personal matters. In online learning, questions are typically addressed via email or discussion boards. Engaging in email exchanges and consistently checking class discussion boards takes significantly more time for instructors and may lead to more misunderstandings. Other

common issues include technical problems. We experienced that students disconnected in the middle of classes because of home Internet connection failures or reduced broadband speed. The connectivity is critical because getting disconnected during a final exam or a final presentation may be detrimental to a student's class experience or grade. Exam proctoring is another challenge in the online environment. There is sophisticated online exam proctoring software available, but there is no software that never malfunctions, and many exam proctoring applications do not work for international students because those applications are not functional in some countries.

Overall, we expect that online classes will become a key medium of delivering classes at business schools in the future. The COVID-19 pandemic forced many business schools to become more flexible in delivering courses, and we have made immense efforts to adapt to the virtual learning environment. Faculty members now collaborate in this environment and share best practices with each other. In addition, business schools now organize student and faculty activities and various noncurricular student activities, such as virtual job fairs and speaker series. There is no one-size-fits-all solution that meets everyone's educational needs. However, we must understand the advantages and limitations of online learning to make our best effort to develop innovative online teaching methods. This will lead to a better online learning experience for students. We believe that this newly acquired flexibility and the iterative process of improvement in online learning will benefit business schools in growing their student populations and offering high-quality online courses even after the pandemic is over. 

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