

## More programmes are entering the market as online courses grow in sophistication writes Seb Murray

Slowing down is seldom an option in **Olivier Champenois'** job. A senior performance and race engineer for Porsche, for the past three years he has been on the winning team at Le Mans, the punishing 24-hour sports car race in France.

Nor could Mr Champenois slow down for an MBA. The degree traditionally requires students to study full-time on campus, pausing their careers.

"I wanted to develop soft skills [such as communication] and take on more responsibility, but I travel from my home in Belgium to Porsche in Germany, so the full-time MBA was never an option," says the 34-year-old Belgian.

This year, Mr Champenois enrolled in a new online MBA programme at **Vlerick Business School** in Ghent. The nine participants study for an average of 10 hours a week while working full-time and tune into classes via webcams or mobile devices.

The need for flexibility, with would-be MBAs often juggling careers with families, was what prompted Vlerick to launch the two-year degree. "Customer behaviour is changing," says **Steve Muylle**, academic director of the programme. "Increasingly, students expect a more digital experience — they do not want to be limited to studying at a specific place or time."

Vlerick's option of remote, part-time study is becoming more common. There was a 54 per cent growth in the number of business schools offering an online MBA between 2012-13 and 2016-17, from 91 to 140, according to accreditation body AACSB International, which collected data from 459 schools.

"Ten years ago, there were questions around online MBA degrees, such as whether they lacked interaction," says **Ramesh Venkataraman**, chair of the Kelley Direct Online MBA at Indiana University in the US. "But more top-ranked schools have entered the market since then, making the programmes more legitimate and driving applications up."

Enrolments on Kelley's online MBA rose by 33 per cent last year compared with 2016 and applications were up by 12 per cent in that time. Overall, the proportion of online MBA programmes re-



porting application growth has risen from 39 per cent five years ago to 50 per cent globally in 2017, says the Graduate Management Admission Council, which administers the GMAT entrance exam.

The growth of online degrees can be explained partly by advances in technology, which is becoming more immersive. At the **University of Oxford's Saïd Business School** in the UK, more than 200 degree and executive education students have taken classes using Hive — a new physical and virtual conference room which allows far-flung students and academics all to see and hear each other.

**Mark Bramwell**, chief information officer at Saïd, says he does not foresee online learning replacing the traditional format. Certain aspects, such as networking, are delivered better on campus, as students spend more time together than in online programmes. However, he adds that **Hive can make online learning more interactive** than the campus experience in some ways.

“We use facial recognition technology, which captures students’ levels of engagement, interest and emotion,” Mr Bramwell says. “We are still in the early stages, but plan to analyse the data post-lecture to improve teaching plans by assessing students’ engagement with different topics.”

Some schools also see digital degrees as a better way to prepare participants to collaborate and lead remotely through technology such as videoconferencing and chat rooms.

**Elizabeth Mitros**, 31, is a business consultant and Kelley Direct Online MBA student in the US. Most of her dealings with clients are remote. “With the global workforce becoming more distant and managers working across borders, effectively co-operating from a distance is critical,” she says.

**Dan LeClair**, chief strategy and innovation officer at **AACSB International**, adds: “Another advantage is that students become familiar with measuring their performance with data, as schools track online participation to provide feedback, which is similar to what managers do in the workplace.” For example, some companies have measured employee activity such as sleep and stress to encourage healthier lifestyles and potentially improve productivity.

The effect on work-life balance can be a downside to learning digitally. “Even with a flexible study format, online MBA students must manage their time well between work, family, personal responsibilities and coursework,” says **Phillip Kim**, faculty director of the Blended Learning MBA at **Babson College** in Massachusetts, which is mostly online with face-to-face elements. “It is very difficult and requires huge effort and commitment.”

Back at Kelley, **Mr Venkataraman** says that training faculty to adapt to the digital environment is an even greater test for business schools. “The challenge is psychological rather than technical,” he adds. “Professors need to be clearer when communicating the learning goals and providing feedback to online students because, unlike on campus, you cannot call them back into class once they log off.”