



*Blended learning* – combining face-to-face sessions with online work and forums – is one of the fastest-growing trends in education.

On picture: Melanie Liley has graduated with a degree in business studies after five years of juggling studies with a full-time job. Photograph: Martin Godwin.

When Melanie Liley donned mortarboard and gown to graduate with a degree in business studies last week, it was the end of five years of juggling essays and revision with a full-time job in marketing.

And, thanks to blended learning – one of the fastest-growing trends in education – Liley did it all without taking a day off work. "Blended learning meant I could squeeze the degree into my spare time, and study whenever I wanted, but still receive personalised advice and help from tutors and other students," she explains.

Blended learning describes courses that mix classroom-based education with distance learning, often via online features that allow students to receive tailored help from tutors, such as online forums, video conferencing and internet telephony [technology](#) such as [Skype](#) .

Liley began blended learning after spending a year on a traditional course studying marketing and English at Keele University in Staffordshire. "I was having a really good time and learning a huge amount," she says. "But in my first summer off, I got a marketing role working for Triumph motorcycles and, at the end of the holiday, the company offered me the position of marketing manager. It was too good an opportunity to turn down, so I decided to leave university. But I realised that for a good career, I'd need a degree. So after researching the options online, I found out about blended learning on the [Open University](#) 's business course. It really appealed to me as I could fit studies into my own time around work."

Liley spent about 12 hours a week studying, both after work and at the weekend, but wasn't always toiling alone with textbooks. "I'd find it really hard to do it just that way," she says. "Instead, there was a really good focus on mixing up the way you learn, speaking to tutors by phone and email, using chat forums, and face-to-face study sessions. I met up with tutors and other students six times during my course. That helped hugely – you can't pick up everything from a book or even an online tutorial. I stored up lots of questions and blitzed my tutors with them all in one go."

"I struggled with the finance part of my course, so the forums were really helpful. Other students would respond, saying things like, 'I look at it this way, maybe it can help you'. Blended learning was crucial to helping me get my degree while working, and now I'm graduating with five years' full-time work experience, too."

Next year's increase in tuition fees is expected to fuel demand for alternative ways of obtaining a degree, particularly options that allow students to work at the same time. Blended learning is top of the agenda for many of the private education providers who are set to become big players in the UK when the government implements its plans to open up higher education to a wider range of providers. The white paper on the issue is to be published over the next few months. For students such as Liley, the days of distance learning being a one-way stream of static study materials and mailed essays are over.

[The OU](#) – the [UK](#)'s biggest distance learning provider – already has 7,000 academics hosting tutorials in person, marking online assignments and teaching live sessions on the internet – often in unusual ways. The university's science courses, for example, use a "virtual microscope" application, where students and tutors look at tissue samples together, with the technology able to change the lighting conditions and "move" the samples around as if under a real microscope.

"Students come together through organised face-to-face events, but the convenience of not having to travel to classes means that online ones are appealing to a growing number of our learners," says Niall Sclater, director of learning innovation at the university. "A lot of language tuition takes place using audio conferencing, and the mathematicians teach classes using shared whiteboards which are visible on students' home computers, talking to students as they reveal one line of an equation at a time."

Even hands-on courses are now being studied at a distance with the help of blended learning. The University of Northumbria runs a practical anatomy postgraduate certificate for health workers: it's all online apart from a summer school.

Many universities are now opting to teach modules to distance learners at the same time as traditional students to help avoid isolation. Birkbeck College, University of London, is one of them. "Distance learning students are encouraged to join in the face-to-face activities as much as possible," says spokeswoman Bryony Merritt. "From attending lectures and field classes to coming to Saturday sessions, revision classes and making other visits, for example for social events. It encourages a sense of belonging."

Blended learning has also become a key way for universities to attract international students. Students on Portsmouth University's master's in international criminal justice include a Japanese postgraduate working for an international NGO in Afghanistan, a Czech student working for a victim support agency in London, and British police officers working in the UK, Europe and North America. They meet each other and tutors for a two-day induction session at the university before dispersing around the world and working using virtual classrooms.

Similarly, current graduates on the screenwriting master's at Bournemouth University are studying from as far afield as Japan, Sri Lanka and [Germany](#). The course content includes online lectures, seminars and discussions via web forums.

Throughout the two-year part-time course there are four residential stays at Bournemouth's Media School, with five days of workshops, seminars, lectures and networking opportunities each time.

Blended learning is booming as higher education becomes more demand-focused. London South Bank University sends professors from its faculty of business around the country as it guarantees at least three contact days for distance learners each academic year. "We go to venues near them – Edinburgh, Belfast, Manchester, Sheffield, Newcastle, Birmingham, Bristol and Plymouth, as well as London," says Nigel Scott, course director. "Blended learning suits those whose role requires travel or absence during the academic year, plus those who prefer to learn at their own pace."

*By Lucy Tobin*

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