

# A CHANGING OF THE GUARD: THE ONLINE MBA COMES OF AGE

ALEXANDRA SKINNER TALKS TO  
MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY'S LAN SNELL



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**Q. Until fairly recently, online MBA degrees were considered the poor relation, but attitudes have now changed. What's precipitated this sea change in thinking?**

There was certainly a time when online education was not highly regarded, mainly due to average learning experiences and a lack of assurance around learning. However, the digitisation of business and communication processes has created an awareness of, and appreciation for, the effectiveness and flexibility of online technologies and experiences. This, in turn, has enabled business schools like Macquarie to provide unparalleled online MBA experiences to a wider and more varied audience. Learners want flexible delivery options, and this has accelerated the proliferation of online MBAs, some of which are now considered best-of-breed online MBAs. COVID-19 has also played a part, accelerating the transition from campus-based learning to online delivery, making online learning mainstream and the experience and benefits thereof more universally understood.

**Q. There was a time when online learning meant engaging with poorly recorded visual and audio content. How has the online learning environment evolved over the last decade, and how closely does it reflect on-campus learning?**

There is a common urge to compare online learning with on-campus learning, which is completely understandable given that face-to-face delivery has been the traditional method of instruction; however, online learning is different to on-campus learning. Online learning has its own distinct pedagogic approach; it is purposely designed to create specific learning experiences and outcomes at different touchpoints, and the various interfaces and collaboration tools, underscored by planned learning activities, invoke a sense of mastery and build learner confidence. This scaffolded approach creates an engagement infrastructure that ultimately builds learning communities and creates a sense of connection and collaboration, which, in many ways, can be more personal and inclusive.

Adopting an online design-build approach, together with rapid EdTech tools, means that online learning has very much transformed from recorded three-hour lectures, complete with sound distortions and endless pdf documents, to purposeful, design-built learning activities that enhance the learning experience.

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**Q. What does quality online learning look like?**

Despite the rapid advances in EdTech and the mass migration to online as a result of COVID-19, there is still incredible variation in online-learning quality.

One of the myths associated with online learning is that it's easy to migrate in-person content delivery online because it's simply a 'lift and shift' approach. This tends to fuel misconceptions around online learning offering a low barrier to entry, which could not be further from the truth. Quality online-learning provision requires a significant upfront investment, including an overall curriculum architecture with pathway options in and out of the degree to accommodate modular learning options and scalability.

Adopting a learner-centric approach (rather than a tech-led approach) is essential as it respects fundamentals such as motivation and the intentions driving the learning. In this environment, online-learning pedagogy is shorter, sharper, and scaffolded.

A well-designed online programme is integrated and holistic in its overall learning outcomes and deliberately circles back to key theories throughout the programme via different applications.

In using five- to eight-minute videos (captioned) to explain key frameworks, the academic is forced to focus on delivering that which matters.

The contextualisation of learning is discussed in synchronous live classes where students are expected to access and or read the material prior to attending class to maximise the learning experience.

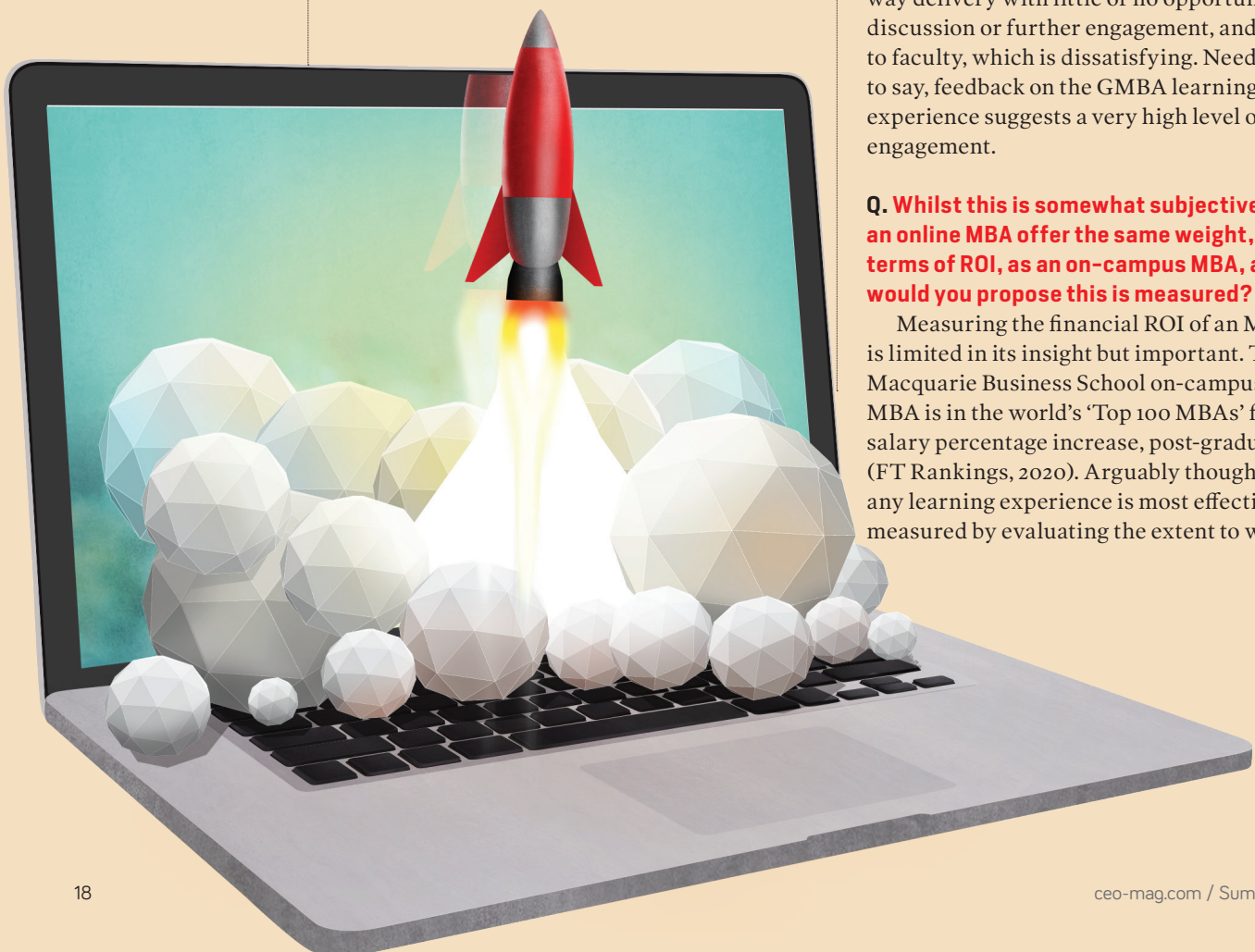
**Q. The vast majority of your students will have experienced on-campus learning at the undergraduate level. With this in mind, what kind of feedback have you received in regards to the structure and delivery of your online Global MBA (GMBA)?**

Learners have different needs and wants, which can be influenced by their stage in life, financial situation, career, family, and personal preferences. The majority of our GMBA students are experienced professionals working full-time, with an average age of 38 and 13 years, on average, of work-experience. Given their commitments, many have expressed the need for quality online delivery, and the flexibility and accessibility we offer meets that need.

In regards to other programmes, we have received feedback from students who have talked about their online-learning experiences away from Macquarie being less than stellar. Specifically, the issues have been around isolation, lack of interaction, one-way delivery with little or no opportunity for discussion or further engagement, and access to faculty, which is dissatisfying. Needless to say, feedback on the GMBA learning experience suggests a very high level of engagement.

**Q. Whilst this is somewhat subjective, does an online MBA offer the same weight, in terms of ROI, as an on-campus MBA, and how would you propose this is measured?**

Measuring the financial ROI of an MBA is limited in its insight but important. The Macquarie Business School on-campus MBA is in the world's 'Top 100 MBAs' for salary percentage increase, post-graduation (FT Rankings, 2020). Arguably though, any learning experience is most effectively measured by evaluating the extent to which



the student's expectations upon enrolment were met, or not, upon completion of the programme. Both the GMBA and MBA have a quality framework -- with student-learning outcomes informed by industry and guided by accreditation -- that is measured for achievement.

Macquarie Business School delivers an MBA and GMBA that empowers graduates with knowledge and skills that will be useful to them throughout their careers and in solving society's biggest problems, and this is reflected in the student-learning outcomes. Accordingly, the most appropriate measure of ROI is the extent to which MBA graduates are empowered with the knowledge and skills promised.

**Q. Networking, or the lack thereof, is often highlighted as a drawback of studying online. What steps have you taken to address this perceived deficit?**

Networking is definitely one of the frequently asked questions we receive. Again, there is a common misconception that online MBAs do not offer networking opportunities. The GMBA has a global cohort with a diverse set of leaders from different sectors and functions, and this acts as an instant global network. GMBA students also have access to the industry advisory board and our extended partners and alumni. We have over 202,000 alumni located all over the world. Further, networking opportunities are embedded throughout the GMBA to ensure relevant opportunities are available to GMBA students just as they are to MBA students.

**Q. Online MBAs have also drawn criticism for their apparent lack of experiential learning. How does one replicate, online, what has typically been considered as an on-ground experience?**

The rapid evolution of online learning means that experiential learning is not only possible but expected, particularly for an MBA programme. Students should look for this as a basis to differentiate between MBA offerings. For example, the GMBA capstone is an experiential and applied digital-learning experience with in-country immersive touchpoints.

Prior to the commencement of the capstone, students are provided with a Playbook containing a range of digitally curated resources that have been designed to help prepare them for this part of the programme. The Playbook features three modules, released over a staggered phase, designed to provide both a ramp-on period and gradual immersion into the capstone. Over this period, students are asked to continuously

reflect on and integrate the knowledge they have accrued over the course of the degree. Students are presented with the industry-supplied challenge early in the Playbook so that they can immerse themselves in the problem from the outset.

As the GMBA is a global programme with students located across 34 different countries, it is important that we partner with clients that are global. For the 2020 capstone, the client has offices in the four countries where our students are located, meaning our students will have the opportunity to engage with the client locally. This type of immersion is not only applied but also demonstrates how experiential learning can be designed with in-country client touchpoints, as well as digital delivery.

**Q. For some, especially those living and working remotely, online delivery is a must, but not for all. Given that some of your students, and applicants, could easily walk into an on-campus programme, why have they chosen to enrol in the GMBA?**

The GMBA offers the full package at a highly competitive price with great flexibility, an innovative curriculum, world-class faculty, and a fabulous student experience.

The Performance Track is another feature that appeals to students seeking to undertake the GMBA who lack the traditional entry requirements (e.g., an undergraduate degree).

As business continues to be disrupted, the GMBA offers unparalleled flexibility in delivery and a format that will accommodate all disruption types, be they work-, life-, or study-related.

**Q. Given the uncertainty most working professionals currently face, what can the GMBA offer, in terms of the future of work?**

One of the factors that prospective students are looking for is a curriculum that is relevant and current. Students have every right to expect that undertaking an MBA will help them to future-proof themselves -- this is part of the ROI question.

Given that the future is unknown, the most effective way of future-proofing oneself is to invest in learning. The labour market is looking for professionals who not only have domain expertise, but enterprise capabilities such as communication, adaptability, and leading skills.

The World Economic Forum identifies 16 future-focussed skills that are necessary to compete in a fluid marketplace. We mapped the GMBA curriculum to these 16 skills in order to present a programme that focusses on developing six key capabilities: strategising, leading, analysing, adapting, influencing, and problem solving.

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**BIOGRAPHY**  
Associate Professor Lan Snell is the Academic Programme Director for the Global MBA at Macquarie Business School.