

## Online or on-campus?

Online programmes at Oxford Saïd

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# Online or on-campus? There are now two ways to develop yourself as a leader

Discussion with Kathryn Bishop, Programme Director of the Oxford Women's Leadership Development Programme, and Tim Morris, Academic Director of the Oxford Executive Leadership Programme.

**Oxford Saïd's first venture into the world of online executive education programmes was in 2017 with the launch of the Oxford Fintech Programme.**

Since then, in partnership with digital education company Get Smarter, Oxford has created further online programmes covering blockchain strategy, digital marketing, algorithmic trading, and artificial intelligence (AI). These first programmes were all based on new and disruptive technologies, and aimed to help executives at all levels get up to speed rapidly with hot topics and the latest challenges facing their businesses. The topics seemed to be particularly suited to online teaching and, as they were new, there were no existing residential programmes to compare them to.

Now, however, the School is entering interesting territory with the launch of two online leadership programmes to sit alongside the suite of popular and highly ranked leadership programmes delivered on-campus in Oxford. Is it really possible to develop leaders online? And how do these new programmes relate to their

more established, residential relatives? I ask Kathryn Bishop, Programme Director of the Oxford Women's Leadership Development Programme, and Tim Morris, Academic Director of the Oxford Executive Leadership Programme.

### Answering specific leadership development needs

Both Tim and Kathryn are keen to emphasise that the newly launched online programmes have not merely cannibalised the existing residential programmes: they have been developed from scratch in order to answer specific leadership development needs in ways that are best delivered online. 'There are some topics that are contiguous,' says Kathryn, 'There are some titles that look the same. But what we teach and how we teach it is quite different.'

Indeed the first cohort of the online Women's Leadership Development programme is running in parallel with Women Transforming Leadership (WTL), the well-established on-campus programme. The programmes have two entirely separate sets of participants.

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'The online programme is designed for women at all stages of their career,' says Kathryn. 'But it may be that for women earlier in their careers it is more suitable than the residential programme. It's not that the online programme is for young women, more that WTL is for women in their third or fourth leadership role: when you are a senior leader, the kinds of problems you are dealing with often require the sort of focus that only a residential programme can provide.'

Tim agrees that full immersion is key to Oxford's other residential leadership programmes, such as the Oxford High Performance Leadership Programme and the Oxford Advanced Management and Leadership Programme: 'When we bring people [to Oxford] it's for the deep dive. You have five days in which you are focusing on nothing else; participants say they find it highly stimulating though very intense,' he says. 'The modular design of an online programme means that your learning experience is spread over six or eight weeks, and your response to it is going to be different.'

### A different pace and focus

Certainly, leaders who have experienced one or more of Oxford's residential programmes will often talk about having to take time after the programme to get their heads around what they have learnt and the new ideas they have encountered. Even when they have spent the week in Oxford building an action plan for when they get back, the sudden difference in pace and focus when they return to work means that they find they need to 'decompress'.

With an online programme, however, participants are able to work at their own pace around the other demands that are placed upon them. They can also experiment with new ideas and put learning into practice as they go along. It may not be as intense as a residential programme, but can allow more time for reflection during the programme.

Of course a slight risk with choosing a programme that will allow you to work around the other demands placed on



your time is that you will be tempted to de-prioritise the programme and your own development. There will be people who downloaded Kathryn's free online reflection tool during March, watched the short video, but never got round to starting the exercise itself. That is one of the benefits of a residential programme – that you have been, as Tim puts it, 'given permission to step off the wheel, to be able to work at a different pace, think a different way, and just enjoy the course.'

However, Oxford's partner in developing the online programmes, Get Smarter, is highly experienced at constructing programmes so that there is a very high completion rate. The fact that the programmes are not free helps of course, plus there is the promise of a Certificate of Completion from Oxford at the end. But there are also regular assessments (some of which are graded), coaches and tutors to nudge you into action, and many opportunities for comments and discussions with your fellow participants.

### Assessments and class discussions

The assessments are not trivial, although there is no need to produce a fully referenced academic essay. They might be along the lines of 'So you've learnt about power and influence. Reflect on

how influence works in your organisation'. Tim explains, 'The exercises are designed to test whether you have moved from understanding a concept to evaluating how it works and critically thinking about how you can apply it.' Similar assessments are part of the Women's Leadership Development Programme, as well as journaling as a means of increasing self-awareness and self-confidence. 'Many of the exercises feed into class discussions so if you haven't done them you will get less out of the programme overall,' says Kathryn.

Ah. Class discussions. These are absolutely key to Oxford's residential programmes. One of the chief benefits of actually sitting in a room in Oxford, listening to Kathryn or Tim or any other faculty members or speakers, is that you can interrupt them, ask them to clarify a point, or even disagree with them. Participants and faculty members will talk over breakfast, over lunch and dinner, and often late into the evenings. Participants will always talk about how stimulating it is to be learning alongside such a diverse group of peers who bring insights from other sectors, other cultures, and other countries. And they often keep in touch and support each other even after the programme has finished.

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### **Kathryn Bishop**

Programme Director of the Oxford Women's Leadership Development Programme

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Can an online programme get anywhere near replicating this sort of experience? Maybe not entirely, but contact with your fellow online learners is part of the structure of the programme. 'Class discussion is built into every module,' says Kathryn, 'so you will have the opportunity to hear a very wide range of views, albeit virtually.' Tim predicts that, in addition, people will very quickly create Whatsapp or Snapchat group discussions: 'People can communicate very richly and intensively even if they don't see each other face to face.'

### **Investing in yourself**

There is no either/or about Oxford's online and residential leadership programmes. They do not overlap. If you wish to participate in more than one, there is no set order in which you should do so. As Kathryn and Tim both say, the

introduction of the online programmes is about offering an even wider range of options for leadership development. They hope that you can look at the full portfolio and see something of which you can say 'this is what I need – or what I need now'.

Most importantly, says Kathryn, they are trying to help women – and men – realise that 'investing in yourself is not a waste of time. It's not self-indulgent. It is important for the future – for both you and your organisation.'



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