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The university where everyone's a stranger

This month will see a new kind of graduate emerge from the realms of cyberspace: the first UK graduates to have been tutored purely online

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Business adviser Sue Melvin found it on the internet, while graphic artist Kate Luck was told about it by her former careers adviser at [Notschool.net](#). They are among 340 undergraduates studying for an online degree in learning technology and research from Ultraversity, the distance learning subsidiary of Anglia Ruskin University. All are taught 100% online and have never met their teachers.

This month the first cohort of 150 students will graduate with a BA (Hons) and, in November, they'll finally clap eyes on their academic tutors at a degree ceremony at Chelmsford cathedral. In fact, Ultraversity is the only UK academic body to offer degrees only taught online. There is no face-to-face element. So what's the attraction about being virtual undergraduates, beavering away on their own?

Luck, 18, is a junior Mac art worker for a graphic design studio in Wellingborough. "I'm training to become a graphic designer and I wanted a vocational degree that allows me to develop other avenues such as product photography. I'd thought about a conventional university but I get uncomfortable sitting in a classroom where everyone's working at the same pace." As a student from the online learning community, Notschool, Luck was familiar with Ultraversity's underpinning technology.

Melvin, 50, a business adviser with Basildon enterprise agency, believes beefing up her ICT skills will give her a headstart in designing services that better meet the needs of start-up businesses.

The idea, inspired by Professor Stephen Heppell, then head of the ICT in education research institution, Ultralab, was taken beyond the development stage by a team of

academics committed to e-learning. The principles behind the degree are that all students are in jobs, content is negotiated between student and facilitator, and assignments can be submitted in various online formats such as PowerPoint, digital video and audio to create an e-portfolio.

"This is a new media degree for the knowledge age," says Ultraversity's project leader, Stephen Powell. The adult continuing education/distance learning market served by Ultraversity sees it competing with foundation degrees (part-time vocational degrees, part college-based and part work experience). The key difference is that foundation degrees cover a much wider range of subjects and are employer-led through the involvement of sector skills councils. Ultraversity makes no pretence to be anything other than student-focused.

Its main rival is the Open University - the UK's biggest distance learning provider. While OU delivers a few courses or modules in a fully online format, all its degree programmes are taught by supported distance learning - a mix of online and face-to-face teaching and summer schools. This makes OU more expensive compared to Ultraversity's £850-a-year course fees. OU degrees also take longer to complete - on average six years - while Ultraversity is designed to take three years while the student is in full-time work.

But there are down sides. Ultraversity's drop-out rate is 40% - higher than the OU's but comparable with other fully online courses. Unable to comment on Ultraversity, OU pro vice-chancellor David Vincent believes OU's approach is the more influential. "We're transforming distance learning by putting out structured units associated with learning software, which will allow students to form learning communities. It's a new way of delivering distance learning."

More choice

Other universities are aware of the market for online study and are starting to offer more choice. University of East London has just announced a unique partnership with commercial e-learning provider Thomson ICS and degree courses, says a spokesman, have been "selling like hot cakes".

Gilly Salmon, professor of e-learning at Leicester University, believes other universities can learn from Ultraversity's approach. "What I'm chiefly interested in is the structure of the degree and the level of online support. [Ultraversity] must be breaking learning down into very small, bite-sized chunks because students need to know they are making progress. Few of us are sufficiently motivated to get through a week of study let alone three years or more."

Salmon, at one time in charge of the online certificate in management at the OU Business School, feels online methods are now part of the learning mix at most

universities and, as such, strongly interwoven with traditional pedagogy. "Online resources, VLEs, and contact with lecturers is supportive to students regardless of whether or not your degree has a physical location. But there is no evidence to show higher tuition fees or rising costs of student accommodation are pushing students towards online study. These choices are made for personal reasons."

Ultraversity's Stephen Powell believes his strongest selling point is the learning journey undertaken by the students themselves. "Our emphasis is on communications - students working together. It's not a solitary experience. The selling point for employers is that they are getting a graduate who is a problem-solver - someone who is highly motivated and is going to make a difference to your business."

While conventional degrees test learned theory through academic essays and dissertations, an Ultraversity degree involves working with peers, sharing knowledge and honing ideas through asynchronous conversations with fellow students. The aim is to boost students' confidence in handling new media, manipulating databases, using the internet as a research tool and networking effectively online.

Assignments are set by tutors to reflect real-life situations or issues students face in the workplace - so they have an immediate application. "We call our approach 'action research methodology'," says Powell. "The curriculum or focus comes out of their professional development requirements. It is identified in negotiation with their learning facilitator, which is why we call our students researchers and not undergraduates."

Ultraversity has two virtual learning environments. Day-to-day communication between students and tutors is through First Class, a platform once used by the OU before it switched to Moodle. Each student has a facilitator, a tutor who they can telephone or email and whose role is to direct their studies. Then there is Plone, a US open access system, on which sits Ultraversity's "hot seat" virtual master classes - online lectures given by world-class academics followed by asynchronous discussion.

Ultraversity's main appeal is to those in junior or middle management in public services - people who need a degree to further their careers and want to use ICT more proficiently. When it was launched three years ago, Ultraversity academics believed the main market would be teaching assistants wanting to become teachers or NHS staff looking for professional development. But the market has proved much wider.

And the experience of a fully online degree is not as robotic as it sounds. Sue Melvin describes a chat room set up for her cohort - where the lecturers are barred. It's a "laid-back" virtual student union bar called Ultra Thirsty. "People drop in and we put music downloads on it. We chat socially or about work and you get to know people socially. One topic isn't allowed. We never talk about our assignments!"

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