

**Julia Balogun** describes how commitment and a successful partnership are helping a UK management school anchor and build its diverse online masters programmes

# Building a global presence



The University of Liverpool and its partner US-based Laureate Online Education, have been delivering online programmes worldwide since 2001.

Over the last decade international education has grown in size and stature at Liverpool through many successful transnational programmes and the partnership with Laureate.

It is Europe's largest provider of online post-graduate degrees and the University of Liverpool Management School (ULMS), working within this partnership, now offers a wide range of specialist online masters and doctoral programmes.

These programmes are delivered 100% online and are targeted at working professionals, who study part-time. The partnership with Laureate allows ULMS to deliver programmes to a large number of students world-wide, enabling the development of truly "global" classrooms. Students are typically in their 30s and come from over 160 countries. Since the programmes are fully online, they provide a way to a degree that fits into students' professional lives, allowing them to continue in their jobs.

In addition, the highly collaborative online environment, which assigns students to study groups with other professionals from other countries, provides opportunities to build networks and insights that are valuable in a global economy.

The core modules of the online MBA, ULMS' most popular degree programme, have recently received EOCCS accreditation from EFMD. Since ULMS aims to be a globally connected management school offering world-class education, we consider this accreditation provides the programme with deserved international recognition.

The partnership with Laureate brings together the academic experience and standing of the University of Liverpool, a member of the elite Russell Group of research-led UK universities, with the operational and marketing experience of an established and successful company also active in the educational field.

The partnership operates at all levels from programme inception and design to delivery. ULMS designs programme structures and content and, through the demanding structures and requirements for UK university quality assurance, ensures the academic standards required for the award of postgraduate degrees are upheld. In addition to its experience in marketing, Laureate contributes an understanding of the service concept – vital for the market served by the programmes.

Learning, teaching and assessment practices at ULMS are governed by the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which sets the broad precepts within which UK higher-education institutions must operate. The terms of the partnership between the University of Liverpool and Laureate prescribe categorically that the university has complete and final authority over all academic aspects of its programmes delivered online.

The ethos of challenging, research-led teaching is fundamental to ULMS' approach and is extended to the design of the online portfolio. The Directors of Studies (DoS) who head each programme, are always members of ULMS' academic staff and the vast majority of instructors are research-active, many engaged in research of international quality. We regularly and systematically consider whether the portfolio's curricula and assessment are operating at the required standard of quality. Best practice is identified and disseminated in order to help achieve continuous improvement.

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# 160

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The University of Liverpool has a Quality Assurance Operational Framework that sets out the principles by which the university is assured of the quality and standards of online programmes.

There are many mechanisms for upholding the partnership and the standards of provision, including a joint strategic board and a clear governance structure, an annual monitoring visit, academic planning meetings, academic affairs meetings, online boards of study and examination boards. All of these boards and meetings include representatives from the university and Laureate and, for school programmes, from the school and Laureate.

As part of the programme development process Laureate liaises with the relevant ULMS DoS to deliver collaborative workshops known as "Programme Summits" and "Module Summits". These collaborative workshops bring together ULMS academics with experts from Laureate in marketing, online learning and other relevant areas. Laureate is responsible for the development and maintenance of the online platform and to meet agreed programme specifications and content.

Many additional support mechanisms are provided for students through the online platform. There is a Student Online Induction Course to support students as they undertake their online programme, a Centre for Student Success, an Academic Skills Team and a Disability Centre.

Students have access to tutors and resources that support the development of critical writing skills, researching and synthesising information, the organisation and structure of writing, grammar and referencing, and the development of career support services.

Laureate is responsible for admitting students to programmes according to criteria set out by ULMS and for referring cases to the DoS at ULMS when academic judgement is required.

Laureate is also responsible for recruiting online instructors. These are generally established academics in universities in the US, Canada, Australia and Europe who work on a part-time basis. The ULMS DoS also typically teach some of the time in the online classrooms for their programme.

The long-standing nature of the partnership is evidence of its success and its longevity has contributed to mutual experiences that have enabled the partnership to develop.

One of its key features is that the relationship goes right through both organisations from top

to the bottom. There is plenty of interaction outside the governance and quality assurance structures with lots of skype and zoom meetings. These include regular product team meetings between ULMS DoS and their Laureate equivalents. As the Director of ULMS, I have regular conversations and meetings to discuss strategic issues around the ULMS portfolio.

There are many opportunities for face-to-face interaction, such as the boards, but also shared celebrations such as graduation ceremonies twice a year with the online students graduating alongside campus-based ULMS students.

Critical to the success, of course, is knowledge of online programme design and delivery within ULMS itself as well as within Laureate. As such, ULMS faculty members working with the online programmes are integrated into the school's five subject groups like any other member of faculty. Similarly, the ULMS professional services staff supporting the online operation are integrated into the school's professional services teams.

One of the most impressive aspects of the partnership is the way the online tutors are recruited and trained, since they are critical to the successful delivery of the online programmes.

All online instructors must be approved as honorary members of the University of Liverpool. Laureate provides ULMS with all the required application documentation and evidence for the approval process for honorary status. Laureate is responsible for the induction of online instructors and each one must complete the Laureate induction programme before commencing teaching or supervision. The content and details of the induction programme for new online instructors are provided to ULMS by Laureate for approval.

Prospective online instructors must complete a four-week training module prior to appointment. After this, all new online instructors are mentored during their initial classes and are only allowed to tutor alone once they are deemed to have shown a capability to do so. Expected standards are tough with not all online tutors successfully passing the mentorship period or being allowed to continue should they not pass an annual monitoring review.

There is a student satisfaction survey at the end of every module that consists of four broad areas: instructor, module structure, module content and module workload. In addition to the student survey, moderation of every module is undertaken.

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Lead faculty moderate every class before it is presented to the Board of Examiners for approval. The Laureate Programme Director evaluates the performance of instructors in relation to application of academic integrity policies, grading, feedback, classroom participation and overall performance.

ULMS monitors at least one class per module per board period. This monitoring considers how well instructors apply relevant policies and procedures as well as evaluating the academic standards exercised by the instructors.

A Comprehensive Annual Review (CAR) process is also carried out for each instructor and is used for development and work allocation.

The portfolio of programmes on offer is by no means static. ULMS and Laureate are always looking for ways to enhance the portfolio through new programme content and additions to the portfolio.

Extensions to the campus-based masters portfolio can be echoed in the online portfolio. In addition, ULMS faculty obviously capitalise on the knowledge they have from working online and build this into the use of technology enhanced learning in campus-based programmes.

Over the next year we will work to gain EOCCS accreditation for other programmes in our online portfolio and to build recognition of the quality that we as a management school, and the University of Liverpool more generally, offer to students online. We hope and intend to continue to build our global presence and reach through the partnership.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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