



7 QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE JOINING AN ONLINE PROGRAMME

PAUL HUNTER PROVIDES AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO THE QUESTIONS YOU NEED TO ASK BEFORE SIGNING UP FOR AN ONLINE PROGRAMME – AND THE ANSWERS YOU NEED TO HEAR

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Question 1: Will this programme help me in my career?

Unscrupulous providers, keen to get your credit card number, will undoubtedly respond with a resounding yes. However, this may be disingenuous. In order to answer this question properly, you must first be clear about your own learning objectives. If you don't know why you are signing up to a programme you should stop and pause. If you are about to invest an additional four to six hours a week on top of an already busy professional and family life, sporting activities and/or other hobbies, you should first be very clear on what you want from this experience. In IMD's online programmes, the first question you will be asked on your application form, and the first interaction you have with your coach will be around your specific aims and objectives. This will be the frame through which you will ultimately decide if your programme has generated a strong personal ROI and yielded a meaningful impact. If you're not clear on where you're going, you're unlikely to get there. Beware of providers who simply sell you a programme. Embrace learning partners who engage you in a discussion about what you want to achieve.

Question 2: Who are the other people on the programme?

Any online programme worth its salt will involve regular interaction with other members of your cohort in a number of combinations. Full cohort interaction, typically via a discussion forum, will be particularly useful to allow you to share best practice in exchange with others and to gain reassurance that you are not the only person in the world undergoing this specific issue! Group interaction (ideally five to eight participants) will enable you to form stronger relationships with a subset of the larger cohort and will lead to robust discussion, debates around conflicting viewpoints, and an opportunity to jointly apply concepts and frameworks to a particular business conundrum. A canny instructional designer will have set up exercises that explicitly focus on providing you with opportunities to gain familiarity with a set of business tools. In essence, it is not the answer that matters but rather the opportunity to flex your cerebral muscles and gain practice with a tool that you will subsequently apply to your own business arena. Pair working allows deeper bonding with one other individual and leads to disclosure – the ability to feel comfortable sharing intimate details around a business challenge you face, leading to personalised feedback and new insights gained from a fresh pair of eyes. Of course, all of the above can only reach their full potential if the other participants have meaningful and relevant experiences to share. If the only criteria for participating in a programme is internet access and acceptable bandwidth, be prepared for mediocre interaction and off-the-cuff questionable “advice”, which may resemble the blind leading the blind. If you are not explicitly asked upfront what experience you will be bringing to the party, best steer clear.

Question 3: How is this different from other online programmes I have followed such as MOOCS?

It's highly probably if you are reading this article, that you have already had some kind of online learning experience, ranging from a dreadfully dull health and safety compliance training (aka death by PowerPoint), featuring tedious voiceover of written text and intellectually dubious multiple choice quizzes, to an engaging transformational learning experience that kept your motivation high and led you to willingly sacrifice more time to stay the course. What makes the difference? It is ultimately a combination of three factors: programme content and design; production values; delivery mechanisms. Reflect on the last time you got hijacked at a family gathering to peruse Uncle Jack's holiday photos. After a mind-numbing hour of random photos, presented in an unstructured manner, many of which seemed remarkably similar to the previous ones, some of which were blurred shots of people's feet, and you start to get the picture (no pun intended). Perhaps, however, you may have also been fortunate enough to be invited to the world première of your niece Sally's holiday iMovie – a careful selected filtering of photos whisked on screen for just the right amount of time, ably supported by Ed Sheeran's Galway Girl and with a total running time of seven minutes. Online learning is no different – well-designed,

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well-produced, and well-delivered learning experiences can be spotted a mile off. Ask in advance to see the programme roadmap, an overview of the activities you will be undertaking, snippets of videos, examples of articles and access to the platform that will be used throughout the programme. If the way ahead is not crystal clear, if the content is not built on solid research and development or if you are primarily treated to classroom footage, talking heads and static slides you may want to run for the hills. If on the other hand you feel like you've been immersed in an informative, rigorous and engaging YouTube movie trailer which is relevant to your challenges and piques your curiosity to know more, you're probably in safe hands.

Question 4: Is my coach qualified?

Coach? What coach? A serious online learning provider will not leave you to your own devices. A self-study programme that relies on you having an iron will to wade through multiple screens with no feedback or support mechanism is akin to watching paint dry and the chances are that you will not learn much. If, on the other hand, you have a coach who helps you reflect not only on what you have seen and read but, more importantly, on what you have applied, you're well on the way from knowledge consumption to learning application. Knowing that you should run five kilometres a day and actually putting on your running shoes are two very different things – and only one yields demonstrable results. Of course, as the recent football World Cup in Russia showed, some coaches are better equipped and more qualified than others. Ask your programme provider who your coach will be. If the answer is “the other participants” or “alumni from previous programmes”, alarm bells should start to ring. If your coach is not qualified, why should you listen?

Question 5: Can I access the course while I'm travelling?

If your online programme doesn't include mobile access or better still an app, you'll probably not make it to the end. Just ask yourself how much time you spend on your phone per day and you will soon see why this might be true. The number one consumption channel of our time is your smart device. If your online learning deviates you away from what has most likely become an extension of your right hand, there's not much chance of success. Mobile apps enable you to transform “lost” downtime such as travel commutes into micro learning moments. Skillfully crafted learning nuggets that you can listen to or watch to in bite-size chunks allow you to remain in control of your learning agenda and seamlessly integrate it with your professional obligations. In a time crunched world, carpe diem applies equally to your personal development as it does to any other activity vying for your time and attention.

Question 6: How many people complete the course?

If not many people make it to the finish line, instinctively you know this is a bad sign. A poorly executed programme leads to poorly motivated learners and a dearth of gold medals. What's a good number? IMD's open online programmes have a completion rate in excess of 90%. It's rare that our learners do not complete and it's even rarer that they have not had a meaningful learning experience. If you can't get a clear answer to this question, proceed with caution or not at all.

Question 7: Can I talk with past participants?

If this channel is closed to you, move on. Every provider will vaunt their USPs, provide downloadable shiny brochures, delight you with Oscar-winning video footage... but at the end of the day, what really counts is the feedback from people who have gone before. And don't just ask them “Did you enjoy it? Was it good?” rather “What precisely did you learn? What are you doing differently today that you weren't doing before? Have your colleagues/ boss/direct reports noticed a difference?”. There are the questions that matter, and programme alumni are the

people to ask. So, in summary, march into the fray of online learning armed with precise questions to ask and expecting precise answers. You owe it to yourself to be sure that the learning journey you are about to embark on is underpinned by rigorous, relevant research, meticulously planned, superbly executed and has the right “tour guides” – guides whom will show you not just the usual learning tourist haunts, but who will take you off the beaten track, sometimes to places you might not feel comfortable visiting, but that ultimately will lead to a richer, more memorable and more impactful experience. You may even be able to leverage this for a captivating iMovie of your own...

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This article was originally published by the EFMD Business Magazine.