Online Learning in Business Schools: Challenges, Opportunities, and Strategies for Success

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Abstract. The rise of online learning in business schools has transformed higher education worldwide by overcoming various barriers and providing flexibility for students. This shift was significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted institutions across the globe to rapidly adopt online platforms to ensure educational continuity. This paper explores the factors driving business school students' preference for online learning and gathers their perspectives on strategies to enhance its appeal and accessibility. Understanding students' preferences for online learning will help design experiences that meet diverse needs, while exploring ways to enhance engagement will handle the challenge of maintaining motivation in remote settings. Based on an online survey of undergraduate business students, the study provides insights into key drivers of online learning engagement and offers globally relevant recommendations for the continuous enhancement of digital education in business schools, ensuring its effectiveness and sustainability in the evolving landscape of higher education worldwide.

Keywords: global business school education, online learning, convenience, online modality strategies, online education**.**

1. Global Rise and Relevance of Online Learning in Business Schools

The emergence of online learning has fundamentally transformed business education worldwide, reshaping how institutions deliver content and engage learners. The United States, India, and Mexico have the highest number of online learners and are projected to maintain an annual growth rate of 20% (C, 2025). Furthermore, countries such as Paraguay, Lebanon, and the Philippines are exceeding this rate, with growth exceeding 20% (C, 2025). This global expansion is not expected to slow down (World Economic Forum, 2022). Projections from the United States show the global online education market, currently valued at $259 billion, is set to reach $1,461 billion by 2033, reflecting a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 18.9% (Market.us, 2024). This remarkable expansion is a testament to a global shift in educational delivery, driven by increased digital access and technological innovation.

Historically, traditional in-person education has presented obstacles for individuals with familial commitments, professional responsibilities, or geographical constraints. Online learning has effectively removed these barriers, providing adaptable and accessible educational opportunities to a diverse global student body (Liu et al., 2022; Stewart, 2004). This adaptability has allowed students from various continents to pursue business degrees. The asynchronous nature of many online courses enables students to learn at a pace that fits their individual circumstances (Zheng et al., 2022). As a result, online education has become popular among non-traditional students, including working professionals and parents, who seek to enhance their competitiveness in the global job market.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation, forcing business schools worldwide to adopt remote education models (Laasch, Ryazanova & Wright, 2022). UNESCO (2021) reported that approximately 1.6 billion learners were affected by school closures, leading to the largest global shift to remote learning in history. This period saw the rapid use of digital infrastructures to sustain educational continuity, including synchronous and asynchronous courses and fully online degree programs. Many institutions responded by introducing specialized courses, such as online MBA programs, to ensure uninterrupted access to education despite travel restrictions (Baber, 2022). The swift adaptation by institutions like the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) and IE Business School, among others, shows the global reach of this change (Ikharkar & Chakravorty, 2022; Rana et al., 2022). The African e-learning market also grew substantially, demonstrating the pandemic's impact across different regions (Van Der Merwe, Serote & Maloma, 2023).

Prior to the pandemic, online learning was already gaining traction, particularly in higher education (Newman et al., 2018). Between 2012 and 2017, the number of universities offering online MBA programs rose by 54% (Murray, 2018). Simultaneously, engagement with massive open online courses (MOOCs) grew from 300,000 learners in 2011 to 220 million in 2021 (Dhawal, 2022). These trends confirm that the transition to online learning was a well-established global movement that the pandemic merely accelerated.

Business schools have increasingly recognized the benefits of online learning, including its flexibility, accessibility, and cost-effectiveness (Jung & Lee, 2013; Piskurich, 2006). The adoption of digital platforms like Zoom and Coursera has facilitated enhanced international collaboration and supported the emergence of hybrid teaching models (Blonder, Feldman-Maggor, & Rap, 2022). In Africa, for example, the e-learning sector's growth was fueled by digitization and the increasing adoption of smart devices (Van Der Merwe, Serote, & Maloma, 2023). In Asia, technological advancements enabled a shift to more sophisticated and immersive learning environments (Hughes, 2025).

Despite this progress, several challenges remain, including maintaining student engagement, ensuring equitable access, and addressing the digital divide. Institutions in resource-limited settings face barriers like restricted digital

infrastructure and a lack of faculty expertise in online instructional design. Inequalities in internet connectivity, especially between urban and rural areas, further compound these challenges (Jakes, 2025). Furthermore, a widespread student preference for digital formats has not been observed. Our data show that only 40% of surveyed undergraduate business students prefer online classes. This highlights significant variability in student preferences based on individual learning styles and academic discipline.

Other research supports this nuanced view. A study in neurosurgery education by Shen et al. (2025) found that face-to-face learning environments yielded better outcomes for learning motivation, teamwork, and communication skills. Students in their study also preferred traditional classroom settings, citing the absence of a conventional atmosphere as a major drawback. Similarly, Bright and Vogler's (2024) research indicates a post-pandemic shift where students value in-person instruction for its support and human interaction, while they value online learning for its flexibility. These studies collectively suggest that online learning, while advantageous, does not universally supersede the benefits of in-person instruction.

Therefore, understanding the complex factors that shape student preferences for online learning is crucial to improving its effectiveness and appeal (Meyerding, 2024). This study distinguishes itself from prior work that has documented student preferences, such as convenience and flexibility. While these broader trends are recognized, this paper undertakes an in-depth qualitative investigation into why some U.S. business students express these specific preferences. This investigation moves beyond generic observations to provide a nuanced, post-pandemic understanding of why and how these preferences manifest among business school students. More critically, it synthesizes their detailed, actionable suggestions for enhancing engagement in online environments. This qualitative richness, coupled with the focus on the post-pandemic context within business education, offers novel insights directly applicable to pedagogical design and institutional strategy. Given that 40% of surveyed students indicated a preference for online class modalities, this research is valuable for understanding the factors motivating this growing segment. Additionally, it can help in developing strategies to improve online education for all students, especially considering its growing importance in higher education. Furthermore, while this research is based on data from a U.S. business school, the insights and suggestions are relevant to institutions worldwide. The U.S. has played a leading role in adopting online learning, but institutions across Asia, Europe, Africa, and Australia have also embraced and advanced digital education with notable agility. As such, our findings are intended to support educators, administrators, and policymakers across diverse global contexts in optimizing digital learning environments to meet the evolving needs of a globally connected student body in the post-pandemic era.

In the next section, we will provide an overview of technological advancements in online learning and summarize educator experiences. We will then introduce our two research questions: "What Factors Influence Students' Choices Regarding Online Learning?" and "How Can Online Classes Be Made More Interesting?" By exploring these questions, the study aims to provide insights relevant to business schools worldwide.

2. Technology Facilitating Online Learning in Business Schools

To remain competitive in an increasingly global and digital economy, business schools must continually enhance their online learning offerings. Technology has played a crucial role in this evolution, expanding access to education beyond traditional classroom settings through tools ranging from interactive multimedia to advanced learning management systems (Gryaznov, 2021; Thomas & Thomas, 2012). As industries evolve, professionals need to develop not only technical skills but also the ability to adapt to new digital environments (Reaga-Castro, 2024). Without continuous innovation in online education, business schools risk falling behind in preparing students for the rapidly changing professional landscape (Collier & Powell, 2024; Kimberly & Bouchikhi, 2016).

The significant global investment in education technology, projected to reach $404 billion by 2025 (North & Trucano, 2024), underscores its vital role in shaping how business education is designed and delivered. Initially, online courses were basic and text-based, often delivered via email or VHS tapes (Ali, 2008). However, the widespread availability of the internet and advancements in digital technology have led to a substantial evolution, greatly expanding online learning's capabilities and improving the overall student experience.

Modern business schools have invested heavily in sophisticated digital platforms to replicate the in-person classroom. These platforms incorporate interactive multimedia, virtual classrooms, and collaborative discussions. A key component of this shift is the widespread use of Learning Management Systems (LMS) like Canvas, Blackboard, and Moodle (Sinaga & Pustika, 2021). These systems serve as virtual hubs where students can access course materials, submit assignments, and interact with peers and instructors. Complementing these systems, video conferencing tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams enable real-time, interactive remote instruction (Maqableh & Alia, 2021). For example, INSEAD has created Live Online Rooms (LORs) on its campuses with advanced technology to enhance hybrid learning (Campos, 2021). Similarly, leading U.S. institutions like Harvard Business School Online have developed their own proprietary platforms to offer customized, self-paced learning experiences to a global audience (Listed, 2017).

The flexibility of online education has created new opportunities for working professionals and students in remote areas (Liu et al., 2022). Online programs