

Publication: Financial Times Online
Date: 01 November 2018
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Move aims to cut cost of sharing academics and improve on videoconferencing



Larry O'Reilly, chief executive of Arht Media, appears as a hologram at Imperial College Business School in London © Anna Gordon/FT

MBA students will soon attend lectures given by holograms.

The Future of Management Education Alliance, a group of six highly ranked business schools led by Imperial College Business School in London, wants to make classroom teaching more engaging through the use of innovative technology.

The primary focus for the alliance is a digital teaching platform. But the members will also be offered the hologram system, which Imperial is adopting for its MBA classes, aimed at cutting the cost of sharing their academics while hopefully improving on videoconferencing.

The use of the hologram technology also reflects how business schools are trying to add a wow factor to fend off the challenge not only from rivals but also from online learning courses that offer cut-price tuition.

"This gives our teaching staff a sense of presence when talking with students," said David Lefevre, director of Imperial's Edtech Lab. "Otherwise we might as well run a lecture on [videoconferencing service] Zoom." The holographic professor would be able to take questions in real time, he added.

Imperial has created an educational technology venture, Insendi, to help digitise existing degree programmes offered by the other alliance members, ESMT Berlin, BI Norwegian Business School, Singapore Management University's Lee Kong Chian School of Business, France's Edhec Business School, and Ivey Business School in Canada.

A key aim of the partnership is to challenge the perception of digital education as a sub-standard alternative to classroom-based programmes, according to Emmanuel Métais, Edhec's dean.

"This initiative reflects our commitment to be at the forefront of innovation, not only to provide students with a better learning experience but to make them succeed in a fast-changing world," Mr Métais said.

"At Edhec, we believe that excellence and innovation are the two pillars on which our people build their own personalities and careers to make an impact on the world."

Although Imperial's engineering teams will develop much of Insendi's technology in house, the hologram system was bought from Toronto-based Arht Media.

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Its technology is significantly cheaper than other alternatives on the market because its software enables holograms to be created using a standard broadband internet connection and conventional cameras and projection equipment.

Arht wants to create a global network of university campuses able to host presentations via holograms, according to its chief executive, Larry O'Reilly.

"The schools suddenly become more open to the world and they are helping us to grow our network," he said.

The Future of Management Education Alliance will also provide access to expert digital training, consultancy and programme development support to ensure greater ownership over its own online offerings, according to Francisco Veloso, dean of Imperial College Business School.

"New pedagogical models and greater governance are needed to ensure business schools can step up to the challenge," Mr Veloso said.

"Demand is rapidly growing, from business school applicants and employers alike, for programmes which provide the greater flexibility and access that today's modern technologies can afford."