

Things to consider before selecting an online institution

Education experts have urged parents and prospective students to carefully consider an institution and its programmes before signing up for online or distance learning offerings.



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“It is absolutely crucial that one looks at not only the registration and accreditation status of an institution, but also investigate its ability to provide the highest quality of academic excellence,” says Colin Northmore, principal at Evolve Online School, a brand of private education provider, ADvTech.

Northmore says once the credentials and logistical ability of an institution to deliver a quality education have been established, there is one non-negotiable consideration that must be taken into account.

Hallmarks of successful online programmes

“A recent survey by The Independent Institute of Education has confirmed that the key element to successful learning during lockdown, was the ability of an institution to keep students connected, engaged and motivated,” he says.

Northmore says many online or distance learning providers merely provide a paper-behind-glass style curriculum, which

makes it extremely difficult for students, especially young ones, to get deeply involved in and excited about their learning journey.

“As many parents experienced during lockdown, some schools made the mistake of trying to run a synchronous timetable by trying to follow the same schedule they would have if the students had been attending live lessons. Proper online schooling does not work this way, which is why parents must carefully evaluate their options.”

Being an online learner is like home-schooling with one significant difference, he says.

“Online students following excellent programmes will gradually become more and more capable of learning without any adult assistance at home. It is a feature of an excellent online school that we provide a process for children to learn the skills they need to be independent learners,” he says.

“This process includes self-pacing, time management and the ability to schedule their day. It also includes teaching children to work collaboratively with peers in remote locations. No parent should choose online learning for their children without expecting the learning process to be delightfully different.”

Northmore says a good online school that focuses on the holistic development of children must have a strong focus on foundational, social and emotional learning skills, and sufficient personal attention and interaction with educators, mentors and coaches.

Human engagement and support

Elbie Liebenberg, MD of MindSharp, agrees regarding the importance of human engagement and support as part of the online learning journey.

“Online learning is much harder and motivation is impacted when the student is left to their own devices, only to submit the occasional assignment to a generic e-mail address,” she says.

“For online learning to be successful and enjoyable, the human touch, engagement, feedback and support are very important factors.”

Liebenberg says there are a host of professional development platforms online which are similar in terms of their offering, so prospective students must seek out those programmes where they don't simply receive modules that they have to wade through on their own, which increases the likelihood of bailing out before the successful completion of a programme due to feelings of boredom and isolation.

“If you really want to make a success of your career and build upon your existing skills, you need to dive into your further learning. This is most successfully facilitated if an institution provides personal support throughout the study journey as opposed to only automated feedback.

“Prospective students must also enquire about the efficiency of the technology and the logistics of an offering, as well as whether they will have access to qualified tutors to step in and assist them should the need arise.”

Northmore says despite the fact that there are many new players in the market following the unprecedented, mandated turn to online learning last year, all programmes are not created equal, and could prove a disappointing experience for those parents and students who opt for this approach if they do not do their homework carefully.

“Online learning can be a great option for many, for a host of reasons, including safety concerns, the personality of the student, the personal choice of parents, and geographical considerations. However a good institution must take an holistic approach to the child's academic and personal development, to ensure a successful and fulfilling academic journey.”

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