

*[Adapt from “What to expect from an online semester (and how to conquer it!)”, by Miss Kali SMITH, MSc in Applied Economics, on School of Business Student Blog:  
<https://bus.hkbu.edu.hk/eng/bus/programme/student-blog/student-blog-55.jsp>]*

## What to expect from an online semester (and how to conquer it!)

By Kali SMITH, MSc in Applied Economics, Class of 2019-20

Unfortunately, Hong Kong saw a surge in Coronavirus cases right before the Fall semester at HKBU was set to start in person. As such, the upcoming semester has now been shifted online. Don't panic just yet about starting your Masters Degree online. As someone who has spent 7 months of her 10-month programme studying virtually, I have prepared a list of expectations and tips for you to get yourself on the right track for the following months.

### The Great [Fire]wall of China

While international students reading this blog won't have to deal with the Chinese firewall firsthand, it will still impact the way you interact with your classmates. With the University asking those who are currently abroad not to come back to Hong Kong for now, many of your classmates from Mainland China will most likely remain at home to cut costs. What does this mean for you? Your classmates will have a spotty connection to Google Drive (if at all) and no access to other social media you're familiar with (WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc). This, however, will not stop your teachers from assigning mass amounts of group work to you! While the University does provide a VPN for students who need it, many of my classmates still had trouble accessing it. So, how should you work collaboratively around this barrier?

Tip 1: Download WeChat! WeChat is the social media of choice within China and is currently accessible by most part of the world (although the US has just banned [WeChat](#)). Your class chats, group project chats, and even communication with teachers will be most effective through this app. You can share documents, do group calls, and get to know your classmates through the “Moments” social media section. This app will be a lifesaver and allow you to connect with your classmates before you join them in person. [Bonus tip: it is also available on desktop for easy document access].

Tip 2: Always make sure there is a group project leader who is willing to coordinate everyone's works and combine PowerPoints/ other related information. While it will require extra effort for one person, you can no longer use “Google Slides” to all collaborate at once on the same document. Different approaches work for different groups. My way around it was to have the group select a pre-made PowerPoint theme and everyone being in charge of making their own slides; one of my classmates preferred to be in charge of design and would have her classmates just send information and layout preferences, and she would do the rest of the work herself.

Tip 3: Zoom call like crazy! Individual accounts can have calls up to 40 minutes long (but you can make as many of these as you want) and you will be able to share screen and draw on the screen. This is really helpful for group projects when you are brainstorming, compiling ideas, and practicing presentations from a distance.

## Classroom Changes

Taking Masters classes online takes a serious amount of dedication. For one, it is much easier to stay focused in a classroom where your teacher is staring at you and you're surrounded by peers (though that didn't keep my classmate from watching a NBA game on his iPad in the front row during class once). Now, you must sit by yourself for three hours at a time and somehow not look at your phone, or browse the internet, or take a nap.

Thankfully, your teachers have been teaching online for at least a semester now and have grown in their interactive capabilities. While it will still vary by teacher and programme, some teachers have students actively participating in group discussion during class (MScBM I know is notorious for this) or having weekly timed quizzes on the study materials of previous lessons to make sure you're learning (MScAEcon loved this method). Either way, the course material has not gotten easier and many people felt their course load increased as teachers looked to assess students learning more frequently. What are some ways to stay focused and learn?

Tip 1: If you are in Hong Kong, find a classmate to watch the classes with. It is remarkable how much one person being present can help you focus on your work more. If you aren't around anyone who is taking the same classes, find someone who can be your accountability partner. It works best if they are also working on something and will scold you for using your phone. While it might sound silly, it really can help you pay attention to your work.

Tip 2: If you had a hard time focusing during class - rewatch the class on 2x speed right before the quiz/ exam. For me this past Spring I found I often only picked up half the material during the first listen. While many people think that it is a waste of time to rewatch classes, I greatly benefitted from the ability to quickly refresh myself on the material. If 2x speed doesn't work for you- 1.5x speed is also available.

Tip 3: Make sure you have a webcam that works! While your teacher may not make you turn on your camera during class, you will **definitely** need to turn it on for presentations. If you do not have access to one, you can use the Zoom app on your mobile phone and put it on a tripod (or stable surface). On mobile you won't be able to easily access the additional features of Zoom (like screen sharing) but if you make two zoom accounts, you can log in with one account on your laptop and one on mobile! Just make sure that if you are talking through your mobile, your laptop is muted.

## Communicate your Situation

Everyone is facing a tough situation with a virtual semester. You have to learn advanced concepts remotely, it might be hard to ask for help, and group work might take a little longer than usual. But the teachers are also struggling in finding ways to make sure all their students are engaged and learning the materials. The best thing for you to succeed is make sure you communicate your situation to teachers and work together so that you can succeed.

If you have a drastic time zone difference, make sure you tell your teacher to avoid taking exams at 2am! Ask your classmates for help if you don't understand something! Request a Zoom call with your teacher if you need extra guidance! Don't just give up because it doesn't come easily. Everyone wants you to succeed- you just need to put the work in.

Hopefully you only end up online for one semester and can move to Hong Kong for the Spring ready to engage in the full HKBU experience. Until then, good luck!