

# An advanced oncology degree for busy specialists across the globe

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Oncologists who want to develop and work to their full potential can find it hard to balance the competing priorities of clinical practice and academic study. For some of them, wherever in the world they may be based, this new online MSc in Advanced Oncology run by the University of Ulm may be the answer.

**I**t is always early morning somewhere in the world! And somewhere a busy cancer doctor or scientist is up extra early and logging on to a site in Germany before they head off to their own clinic or laboratory. As they drink their tea or coffee, they view a lecture by one of the experts from the University of Ulm and they look over their notes as they take the bus or train to work.

These are the first students to undertake an online Master of Science in Advanced Oncology – now well into their second semester at the University of Ulm, but physically somewhere else completely.

The 18 students are doctors or scientists specialising in haematology and oncology and working in cancer centres from Brazil, Egypt, Iraq, Moldova, Romania, Nigeria and South Africa, to Germany, Italy and USA. Numbered among them are some scientists working for pharmaceutical companies who need to learn

more about cancer therapy and trials.

The two-year course is run from the International Center for Advanced Studies in Health Sciences and Services (ICAS) at Ulm University. Medical director Manuela Bergmann, an oncologist and haematologist, designed the course to fill a gap in postgraduate training, to “export knowledge” and to help students become leaders of cancer services in their own countries.

“It is a study programme for people who are very engaged in their profession and are all experts. The major problem in such a group is time management. They need to be up to date but they cannot afford to go to seminars and be out of the office for more than one week. So far as I know, no country in the world offers a curriculum online where you get an organised structure with the latest level of knowledge. We tried to find a solution for time management and a structure for organised knowledge.”

Each semester has 60–70 lectures, which the students follow at their own pace. In addition they attend one-week seminars (‘summer schools’) five times each year, where they meet their lecturers and fellow students.

There are six modules in all. The four online modules cover interdisciplinary oncology (including cellular and molecular biology), clinical research (including ethical aspects and management of trials), advanced therapies and management. The management module prepares doctors to run a department, using lecturers from the Institute of Business at Ulm University and from McKinsey consultants. Katarina Janus, professor of healthcare management at Ulm and a pioneer of research into what motivates doctors to work most effectively, also teaches on this module.

The lectures themselves are interactive – with opportunities to leave questions for the lecturer and get a response,



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usually within 24 hours. There is also a link up with the European School of Oncology (ESO) – which is also the publisher of *Cancer World* – under which students can attend the weekly online live e-grandround sessions ([www.e-eso.net](http://www.e-eso.net)). At the end of their two-year course they also attend the week-long Masterclass in Oncology run jointly by ESO and ESMO (European Society for Medical Oncology), which is designed for future leaders of oncology.

The two-year course costs almost

€20,000 plus travel and accommodation for the five attendance weeks. While a few students cover their own fees, most are supported by their employers (in the case of the pharmaceutical companies) or by charitable foundations. ESO supports two of the 2010–2011 intake and will support one of the dozen who will join them in October 2011.

Most of those on the course are in their 40s. Ahmed Rabea, assistant lecturer at the National Cancer Institute in Cairo, where he specialises in malignant haema-

**The class of 2010. The first intake of 18 doctors and scientists come from 10 countries across the globe, and are pictured here at one of the week-long seminars that supplement the predominantly online course work**

tology, is the youngest at just 29 years old.

“They have been encouraging older people in higher positions to do the course. I was amazed and really happy that I was accepted,” he says. Ahmed was still more delighted to be awarded an ESO bursary. “I would not be able to afford this course if I were not supported by ESO. They are paying for everything, the course, travelling, accommodation, everything.”

“I believe we can change the way we treat the patients with a better outcome if we have been taught well with

## “Clinical oncology is highly dynamic and requires almost continuous medical education”

the newest modalities and try to apply that in our job. I know there is a problem in Egypt with financial support, but if we are taught to conduct proper experiments and trials we can supply our patient with the proper medication. It will give me an idea about the best way to deliver knowledge and update junior residents. It has also opened a lot of opportunities for contact with physicians from all over the world, and this may be a seed for future collaboration.”

For the first semester, when he was completing a fellowship at Princess Margaret Hospital, Toronto, Canada, Ahmed would listen to lectures before he went to work and make up time at the weekend. In Cairo things are tougher, since he works six days a week until all the patients have been seen, which can be as late as midnight. He is confident, however, that he will finish the course successfully. “I am really happy with this programme and I am eager to finish it because it will do a lot for me. I know I can do it.”

The other ESO bursary went to Zeinab El-Sayed, assistant professor at the Department of Clinical Oncology at Ain Shams University, Cairo, where she specialises in head and neck cancers, sarcomas, paediatric oncology and cancer of unknown origin.

“I obtained my MD in 1999, but clinical oncology is highly dynamic and requires almost continuous medical education. It is not the same as it was 10 years ago. When I saw the modules and the curriculum, I found this course very attractive.” A visit to Ulm convinced her that the course was right. “It was very impressive. I found the staff very cooperative. The other students are a very nice group. I was very happy and felt I had made the right choice.”

She rises early to do her studying, and makes up time at the weekend, as she

ensures that her two boys, aged 16 and 11, are also doing their homework!

Course organisers can see how much time each student spends on line, but the acid test is not the hours of work but passing the exams in each module. There is no requirement to study a lecture if this is an area where a student is already strong. Manuela Bergmann says, “The students can decide themselves where they have difficulties and have to do more, and where they have less to learn. It is up to them.”

Chatrina Melcher, coordinator at the European School of Oncology, said that ESO was backing the course because of its sound structure and innovative approach. “The Master Online Advanced Oncology programme stands out for its impressive and very well structured contents and because it provides academic recognition. It is an excellent example of blending traditional attendance seminars with e-learning, which we felt is an innovative approach.”

This course does not admit nurses or younger doctors who have just qualified. However, Manuela Bergmann says that adding new courses will be considered when this one has proved its worth. Applications for the 2011 intake can be obtained from her at Ulm by writing to [icas@uni-ulm.de](mailto:icas@uni-ulm.de). The closing date for applications is 15 May 2011.

