

# This New MIT Master's Program Doesn't Require A College Or High School Degree

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By [Fred Thys](#) 



A pioneering master's degree program at MIT is about to change the way graduate students are admitted and how much they pay.

Right now, MIT selects most graduate students pretty much the same way other universities do: Students usually have to have a college degree. They

have to take standardized tests, like the GRE. They must send letters of recommendation and submit their earlier grades.

Esther Duflo thinks MIT can find a better way.

"The GRE is not very informative, because no one who comes to MIT doesn't have a near-perfect GRE anyways," Duflo says.

Letters of recommendation, Duflo adds, are only useful if they come from people and universities that MIT faculty are familiar with. "So, in practice, if you come from the University of the Middle of Nowhere, we have no way to judge the quality of your application, and therefore that creates a lot of barriers."

Duflo is a co-founder of MIT's Poverty Action Lab. It measures the effectiveness of programs aimed at helping the poor, and it does so by borrowing a method used in medicine: randomized control trials.

The Poverty Action Lab, officially known as the Abdul Lateef Jamil Poverty Action Lab, or J-PAL, is testing more than 800 programs around the world. And now it's part of a bold experiment by MIT: to allow students to take rigorous courses online for credit, and if they perform well on exams, to apply for a master's degree program on campus.

"Anybody could do that," Duflo says. "At this point, you don't need to have gone to college. For that matter, you don't need to have gone to high school."

The master's program is in data, economics and development policy. Duflo says with the knowledge gained in the program, students should be able to run their own evaluation projects. They would know that most imaginative, well-thought-out programs fail, and therefore they have to be tested in the field — and they would have the tools to do that testing.

More than 8,000 students around the world have enrolled online.

"So many countries," Duflo says. "Ten percent of the students are from China, and then there is a big group of them from India. In total, there are 182 countries represented as part of the program, even some from the U.S."

Among those U.S. students is Kathryn Saloom. She works for a Boston-based global health nonprofit named Pivot.

"We're in rural Madagascar, where health care delivery is, as you can probably imagine, really tough," Saloom says. "They have some of the lowest spending in the world in spending on health care, at about \$14 per capita. And so we've kind of come in to try and strengthen the entire health system and ensure that people can access quality care where they are."

Saloom and her colleagues at Pivot are trying to create a model for universal access to quality health care in Madagascar.

Saloom took one course in the new MIT program in the spring. She is planning to take two more in the fall. She says in public health, words like "impact," "sustainability" and "scalability" are thrown around "without much evidentiary support of what we're really talking about and what we really mean.

"I'm hoping with these five online courses at MIT, and hopefully, with a master's degree, to really learn how to better bridge this gap between implementation work in the field ... the research and the policy."

Saloom wants to know if the Pivot malnutrition program is reaching the people it should. And there's another appeal: "I can take MIT accredited courses online, kind of at my own pace, at a kind of reasonable price based on my earnings," Saloom says.

Students take five online courses for free. They pay only to take the final exam for each class, from \$100 to \$1,000 depending on their income. Once

they've completed the online courses, students can apply to the on-campus master's program. Students are admitted based on their performance in the online courses. If accepted, students would spend about six months on campus: a spring semester and a summer semester. They would be required to complete a capstone project involving a field experiment with randomized evaluation, which could be with their current employer. They would also write a master's thesis.

MIT is still figuring out how much the first group of successful graduates of the online program would have to pay if admitted to the on-campus program, but it would be based on ability to pay. MIT is trying to raise financial aid to cover the cost of attendance and living in Cambridge for the first group of students, scheduled to arrive in 2020.

*This segment aired on July 11, 2017.*

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