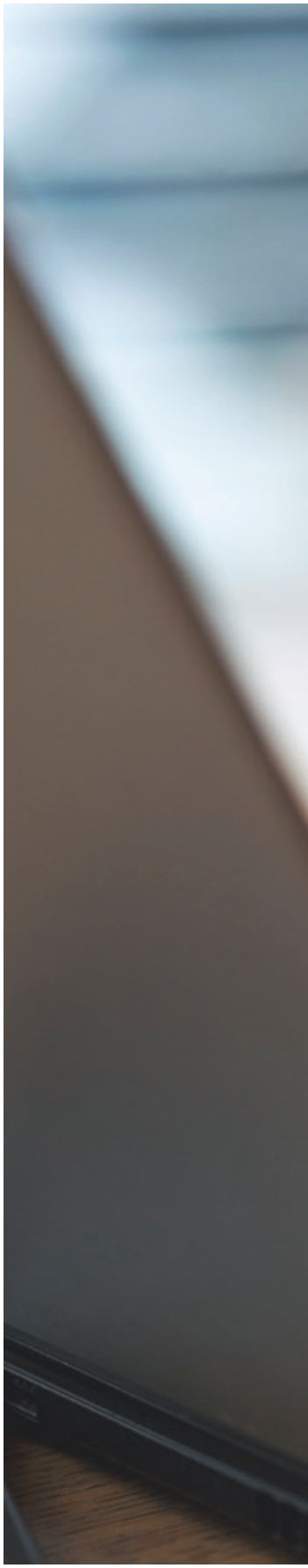
Ginny Gibson analyses the first EOCCS Symposium, where over 50 delegates from business schools and other corporate organisations that have achieved or are working towards EOCCS accreditation, shared their views

EOCCS Symposium 2017



One of the key aspirations of the Symposium was to have time for open and productive conversations on topics that are thoughtful and challenging. That was certainly the tenor of the event. Drawing both on prior input and thought from those present, four key themes emerged where participants felt that they either had good practice to share or needed help to improve.

Transforming the faculty

Many of those participating have moved into online education from other (more traditional) forms of education and therefore have faculty who are themselves having to move from the traditional to the new. Engaging first and training second were seen as critical in developing and embedding online learning into a provider's offer.

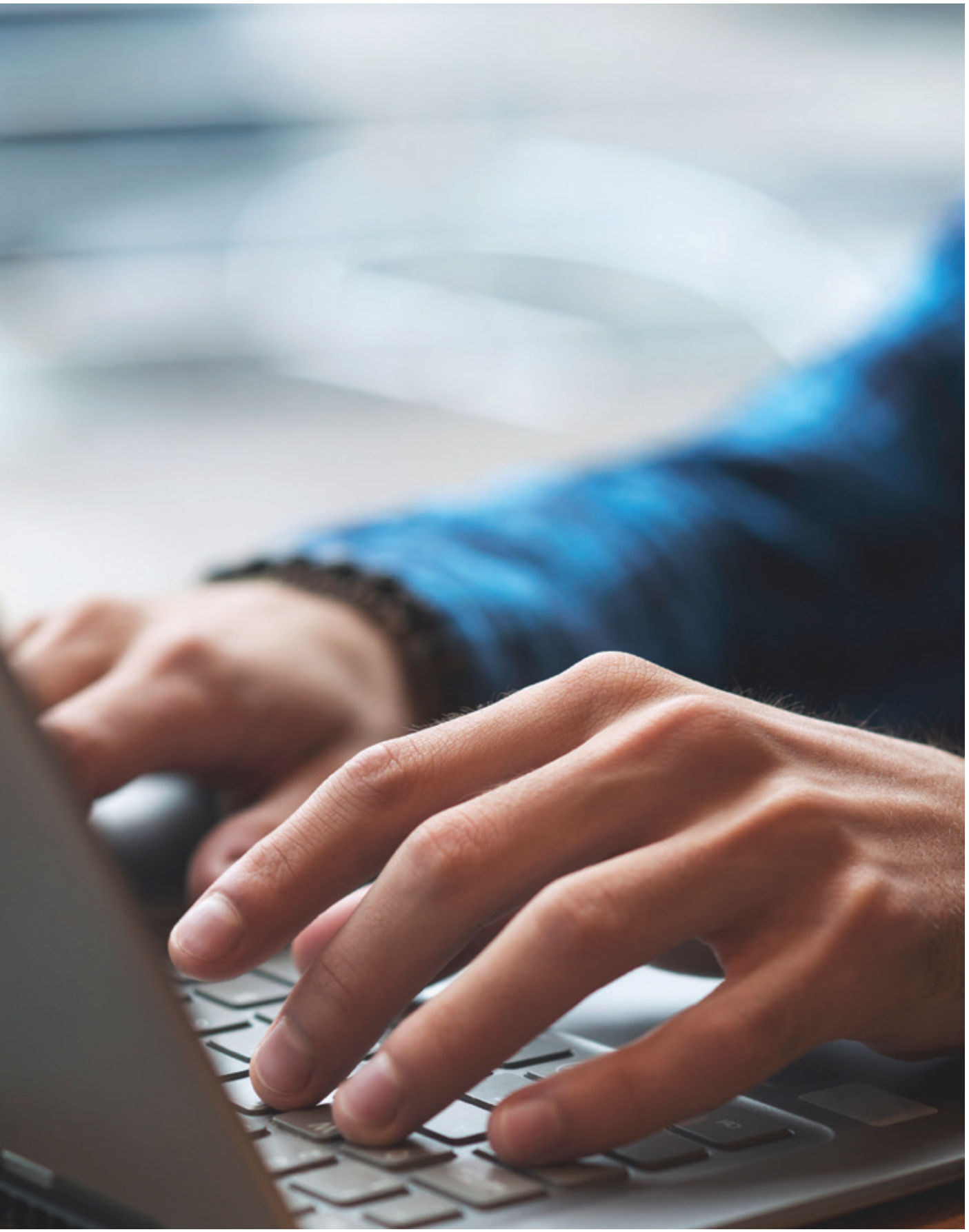
Some institutions have done a lot to promote online learning and raise its profile via briefings and reinforcing how online complements classroom teaching. Others have taken a more strategic approach, embedding online in all that they do – whether purely online or blended – and developing a focused programme to create online content and pedagogy with high-quality support. All acknowledged that investment in support is essential if a real step-change in approach is to take place.

In terms of training, one school has developed mandatory training for any faculty delivering its online MBA. This also includes mentoring during the first cycle of a course and ongoing professional development, again delivered online. Others take a more bespoke approach depending on the "level of maturity" of individual faculty and allowing the learning required to be developed more organically through a "test and learn" approach.

Lastly, there was also a focus on peer-to-peer learning by creating communities of practice as a mechanism to capture and share best practice across an institution.

Given the different requirements there was some discussion on the incentives used to get faculty involved, whether that be through normal workload allocation, cash payments for delivery and, in some instances, payment to faculty for the use of their content across different courses. With differing demands on faculty, the emergence of various financial and incentive models is not surprising. But as online becomes more mainstream this area will need to be kept under review.

The role of faculty was also questioned. With the ubiquitous availability of content, the need for faculty to create new content is declining. The new challenge emerging is the identification and brokering of existing content; acting as a curator of content. The role of faculty, and the wider institution, is to quality assure content; acting as a gateway through which students pass. The added value for students is now seeing their school, and faculty, as trusted advisors with the focus on helping them make sense of the concepts, ideas and models and their real-world application.



Course design

There were three themes related to course design.

First was the need to understand the syllabus in an entirely new way; creating clear learning pathways through the material. The need for strong instructional design skills was essential to make this happen and it was acknowledged by all that there was a very limited supply of individuals with this expertise.

Related to this was a concern that we also need a better understanding of the learning outcomes at all levels (4 to 8) and the influence that has on instructional design, especially given much core content can be used at all these levels.

There was also some discussion of the need to have material in different formats (video, augmented PowerPoints, podcasts, PDFs and so on) to allow for different learner profiles – both in terms of learning style but also in terms of lifestyle – and therefore the need to really understand the target student group, developing *personas* to ensure the needs of all learners are met.

Finally, there was some concern about how to keep students engaged and more importantly collaborating effectively, recognising both the time zones and the lifestyles of different learners.

A key messages was not to focus on the platform-content and learning journey first, with the platform seen as a means to an end. And although there were no magic bullets, it was valuable to identify some of the common themes.

The second area considered was whether there were skills that could not be effectively developed online. Soft skills (team working, making decisions, creativity, problem solving and so on) are often identified as challenging but there were examples of institutions who had developed some of these in an online context.

Leadership development and critical thinking were also mentioned, again with examples of how they might be developed. The mood in the room was that we should not assume that something can or cannot be developed in an online environment. The question is really what is both feasible and most effective for the student and the institution. Understanding the cost and benefits of these is critical.

The third aspect of design was remembering that there is a wider student experience beyond the individual course. That included things such as careers services, guest speakers and special interest groups, which enhance the students' learning. For a truly effective online experience, these wrap-arounds cannot be forgotten.

Analytics

Most of the organisations were using various platforms (VLEs /LMSs) to track students' engagement and retention while many had developed interventions to encourage students to re-engage and various other support mechanisms.

What was not so well developed was the way this data is used more strategically in terms of reviewing a course or wider business objectives. For example, when talking about MOOCs, few had any clear idea of their impact on either driving prospects to paid programmes or their impact on the wider reputation of a school in the online marketplace. Something many agreed needed more work.

There was also some debate on the issue of being overwhelmed with data with a recognition that just because it could be measured did not

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mean that it was important. The view was that a more strategic and considered approach needed to be adopted with real clarity on what should be measured and why.

There was also some concern that there were qualitative measures that were currently ignored but which needed to be incorporated such as issues related to students stress, anxiety and wellbeing, drawing on good practice from employee engagement exercises.

The last theme around analytics was the way data could be used for customisation and the use of artificial intelligence.

Everyone felt this was coming and that lessons from other industries, for example retail, needed to be learned. Questions were raised such as how could data be used to provide almost instantaneous feedback to students on their performance (beyond the quick quiz) or how could content adapt to an individual student's learning style.

One of the interesting observations in the area of analytics was the difference between new entrants that had focused single systems compared to many more established and wider-ranging institutions who had multiple platforms and many legacy systems. The ability to exploit and move quickly, and the challenges faced, were very different and one which senior management teams needed to be aware of.

Emerging business models

The emergence of ubiquitous online learning opportunities seems to have led to the development of new business. In particular, here, is the rise of MOOC platforms that have migrated from being completely free to a paid basis.

The three big players in the market – Coursera, Udacity and edX – are now all offering "courses for credit" and in some cases whole degree programmes. They are partnering with universities, other education providers and the corporate market to develop and deliver a range of paid courses.

There was an interesting discussion about how MOOCs are being used by universities. Initially, the interest was in using MOOCs to learn more about this type of online delivery – a means of building capability and expertise – as well as a way to build reputation and presence online.

MOOCs are now increasingly being used as part of the delivery of on-campus programmes with the MOOCs embedded in a flipped classroom model. They have also been used as an entry route to a traditional programme and as a way of recruiting and selecting talent.

This led to a wider discussion on what the future of business education might look like.

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The group considered the future of full degrees and envisioned an era when students might accumulate knowledge and skills over time to support their employment and career aspirations.

Conclusions

Overall, the first symposium was a great success. It certainly achieved its aim of stimulating conversations and knowledge sharing. We all left with much food for thought, recognising both the opportunities and challenges of the online environment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
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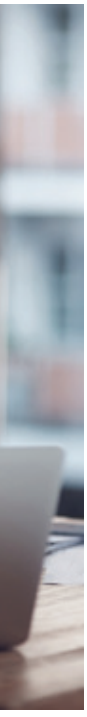

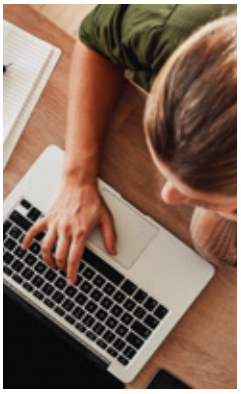

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