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by Seb Murray

Business schools get to grips with online learning

Students and schools swiftly adapted to teaching technology — but obstacles remain

Shortly after Clarisse Agbegnenou began a course in coaching at HEC Paris, in October last year, the second Covid-19 lockdown threw her into the world of online executive education. The French judo champion is used to tests of endurance, but soon found herself suffering “Zoom fatigue” on the endless video calls. “It’s hard to focus for long — I get restless,” she says.

Agbegnenou, who competes in the 63kg weight class, has won four judo world titles, a clutch of European championships and an Olympic silver medal. While she believes in-person meetings can allow richer interactions that are hard to replicate online, she does admit that technology lowered travel costs and made learning more convenient.

“I did not want to leave campus, but I was happy that we could keep learning despite a global pandemic,” she says.

The 30-day, €19,900 course still gave her the coaching techniques and confidence in preparation for a second career when she retires from the sport. Agbegnenou, 28, has plenty of fight left but wants to become a life coach in the future, helping people tackle professional and personal challenges.

Coronavirus hit executive education programmes hard, with many participants unwilling to shift to digital training, at least initially. “In spring 2020, our business went to nothing,” says Don Huesman, managing director of online learning at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School. “Many companies felt the face-to-face experience was superior. We are mammals; it’s written into our DNA to prefer being in each other’s physical presence.”

Anne-Valérie Corboz, associate dean of executive education at HEC Paris, agrees that coronavirus upended the business model. Executive training has traditionally been one of the least digitalised areas of business education, with most revenues earned from in-person courses, she says. “Having to move the entire portfolio online almost overnight was not easy. Covid-19 has forced a complete rethink on what we deliver — and how.”

The good news for business schools was that enthusiasm for online education has been boosted by the pandemic. Corboz says executives have become more familiar with technology in a world of remote work, providing a vital source of income. “Technology was our saviour,” she says.

Denis Konanchuk, director of executive education at Skolkovo Business School in Moscow, says technology in effect underwrote executive education revenues, on which many business schools rely heavily.

“Technology helped us replace those revenues lost from the spring; our bottom line has stayed consistent,” he says. But schools are having to trade off the often higher price of in-person courses with the lower costs and scalability of online education.

Providers have also had to redesign online programmes to win over sceptical corporate clients. Konanchuk notes that Zoom fatigue has reduced participants’ enthusiasm for lectures. “What we were doing on campus just doesn’t work online,” he says. “Everyone is so tired that we have to inject more energy into the sessions.” This includes frequent breakout discussions where participants reflect on applying learning to their jobs. “Teaching online is more about asking questions than giving answers,” he says.

Philip Moscoso, associate dean of executive education at **Iese Business School** in Spain, agrees that “you cannot take a standard approach” to online instruction. He reflects on the challenge of overcoming faculty resistance to technology: “We had to get all the professors up to speed quickly with a crash course in online teaching.”

Now the pandemic is in its second year, confidence in the merits of online education has been strengthened. Moscoso points out that it is easier to draw prominent guest speakers as well as time-poor clients to a virtual class. Digital delivery also quashes concerns over the high cost and carbon footprint of so much travel, he says.

Another benefit is the democratisation of learning. Eleanor Murray, associate dean for executive education at Oxford: Saïd Business School, says technology gives access to more applicants, rather than courses being reserved for top executives. "We have started to tap into a new audience that might not have otherwise considered executive education," she says. "Technology offers the opportunity for scaling up programmes across whole organisations."

The pandemic prompted investment in technology to enrich the learning experience. "For most schools, Zoom was a stopgap solution, but we are getting increasingly sophisticated," says Corboz at HEC Paris, which is trialling holograms that beam a live image of a tutor or participant to campus. "You get the non-verbal communication that's missing from Zoom. It's a step into the future."

For most participants, though, studying on campus still offers a deeper level of engagement and better networking opportunities. Christof Grass-Fleury was due to start **Iese's** management development programme in Barcelona last year, but the pandemic forced a move online for him (although campus classes continued for those able to travel). "What you miss are all the social interactions, the informal coffee chats where you really get to know people," he says. "There's a quality of interaction that you cannot reproduce online."

But Grass-Fleury — who leads a team of catastrophe reinsurance analysts at Zurich Insurance in Switzerland — says technology encouraged introverts to speak out in class. "People often monopolise the discussion, but with video conferencing there's a more even distribution of air time." He shares a consensus view that online training is here to stay.

Don Huesman at Wharton says many training providers expect to "flip the classroom", with students learning material in their own time online, then coming to campus for group discussion and practical application of theory.

"Online learning can complement rather than cannibalise our existing face-to-face business," he says. "We'll likely see a combination of the two . . . in future."