ACCESSIBILITY, FLEXIBILITY, AND SUSTAINABILITY IN EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

Impressions, insights and takeaways from UNICON's Team Development Conference 2021 hosted by the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Insights from UNICON's Team Development Conference 2021 hosted by the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School

Day 1: **Accessibility**

▶ The way participants access executive education, and the way executive education programs access the market – is changing dramatically.

▶ There is an increasingly diverse customer base in executive education.

▶ The digitization of executive education is a long-term trend – with quality of offerings improving, and access continuing to increase.

▶ Evolution in online learning design beyond replication of the 'zoom classroom.'

▶ Pandemic raises questions of access around; the cost of 'experience' vs. education, and equity issues posed by the 'digital divide.'

Day 2: **Flexibility**

▶ Business model innovation and strategizing on updated value propositions, high on the agenda for business schools in 2022.

▶ Covid has redefined the widespread use and understanding of data. Data skillsets set to be demanded in more and more executive programs.

▶ Vital for executive education providers to prioritize the wellness of their own staff, as first step to meeting rapidly changing client demands.

▶ The rise of life design and lifelong learning solutions set to continue.

▶ Lessons of crisis leadership to be learned from the pandemic – including the concept of 'express change management.'

Day 3: **Sustainability**

▶ Following a period of dramatic change and experimentation, analysis of which changes should sustain and which seen as short-term.

▶ Opportunities for partnerships – especially those between University-based providers and entrepreneurial companies and EdTech.

▶ Viewed across the evolutionary timeline of executive education, from 'Executive Education 1.0' in 1972 to today – 2023 could mark 'Executive Education 4.0.'

▶ As broad shifts for business arrive with the future of work, a broad shift in how we serve human capital is required to address new needs.

▶ Qualifications to be reimagined – with microcredentials and stackables one solution being explored.

November 2021 is a fascinating point in time for the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School to be hosting UNICON's annual Team Development conference. Few academic institutions will have experienced a greater involvement in the global response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Over the past two years, as Alex Triantis, Dean of the School recalls, Carey has been engaged in tireless collaboration with the schools of medicine, public health, and nursing at Johns Hopkins, to achieve a positive impact on business and society—through applied scientific research, innovation, and education.

This included crucial contributions around, as Triantis explains, "developing practical solutions in diagnostic testing, therapeutics and vaccines that emerged from our faculty, students and alumni. It was also the data-driven policy recommendations being actively sought in a time of crisis, as well as the Johns Hopkins global Covid tracking dashboard, that provided real-time data on the spread of Covid, for policy-makers and news organizations around the world." We will all be familiar with the dashboard that became an ubiquitous part of Covid reporting worldwide, and was named a top innovation for 2020 by Time Magazine.

As teams and leaders from all around the world, representing the university-based executive education sector as a whole, convene at the always vital UNICON Team Development conference, the disruption of the pandemic and its myriad implications for the future, continues to reverberate keenly in the hearts and minds of all in attendance. It is difficult to imagine a more apt institution than Carey, with its direct insights from the Covid frontline, to guide a three-day exploration into the future of executive education.

Chris G. Myers, Associate Professor and Academic Director of Executive Education at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, has another useful framing for the conference. "I believe [executive education] is at its best when it does three things," Myers proclaims, "It first provides useful frameworks and concepts for making sense of the past; it helps participants build practical skills and tools for addressing the challenges of the present; and it generates insights and expands our thinking for what the future may hold."

How can we recreate executive education to make it far better than it was in the past?

Mike Malefakis, Senior Advisor, Leeds Illuminate

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The three themes for this year's conference—accessibility, flexibility, and sustainability—provide deep-dive subject matter opportunities, to stimulate the kinds of reflection, creative thinking, and discussion that typifies all UNICON events.

Viewed from 30,000 feet, an additional, unofficial theme is inevitably the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the sector—from making sense of and processing the past two years, to knowledge sharing around the challenges of the present, and looking to future horizons to ask— as Mike Malefakis of Leeds Illuminate frames it on Day Three of conference, "How can we recreate executive education to make it far better than it was in the past?"

Taken together the November 2021 conference is one that challenges attendees to ask themselves, "How do we build a learning ecosystem fit for the future of work? One that promotes impactful lifelong learning opportunities, is accessible, flexible and sustainable?"

DAY ONE: ACCESSIBILITY

D "The way participants access executive education, and the way executive education programs access the market, has changed dramatically over the past 18 months," posits Chris Myers in his introduction for Day One.

In terms of making sense of those past 18 months and this dramatic change, UNICON's Membership Benchmarking Survey remains the essential reference point—with 6 pulse surveys carried out since Spring 2020, in addition to the annual survey for 2021— the results of which are presented at conference by the UNICON Benchmarking Committee (including Nora Anderson, Executive Director of Executive Education, Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota; Serge Lafrance, Director, Executive Education, HEC Montreal; and Mark Lewis, Executive Director of Executive Education, University of Chicago Booth School of Business.)

The full survey data is analysed in full elsewhere, however the overall picture is of the highly significant impact to business caused by the pandemic, with a drop in revenues almost across the board for university-based executive education providers, with an average drop in revenues of 25% on a five year basis.

The one exception to the trend, by region, was Europe, where, as Mark Lewis explained, "Europe seemed to have been ahead of the curve especially with asynchronous online programming. They did an excellent job in the local market, along with more globally within EMEA and in Asia."

There is now though, looking globally, clear cause for optimism— various green shoots of recovery are emerging and an upward trending growth curve beginning to appear. Over 70% of schools reported increased revenues in 2021 compared to 2020 for example (with the bounce back quicker and more pronounced at the larger schools). New titles of programs and hours of programming have increased, and a general recovery is now expected, on average by respondents, by June 2022.

Graphic recordings created live by ImageThink
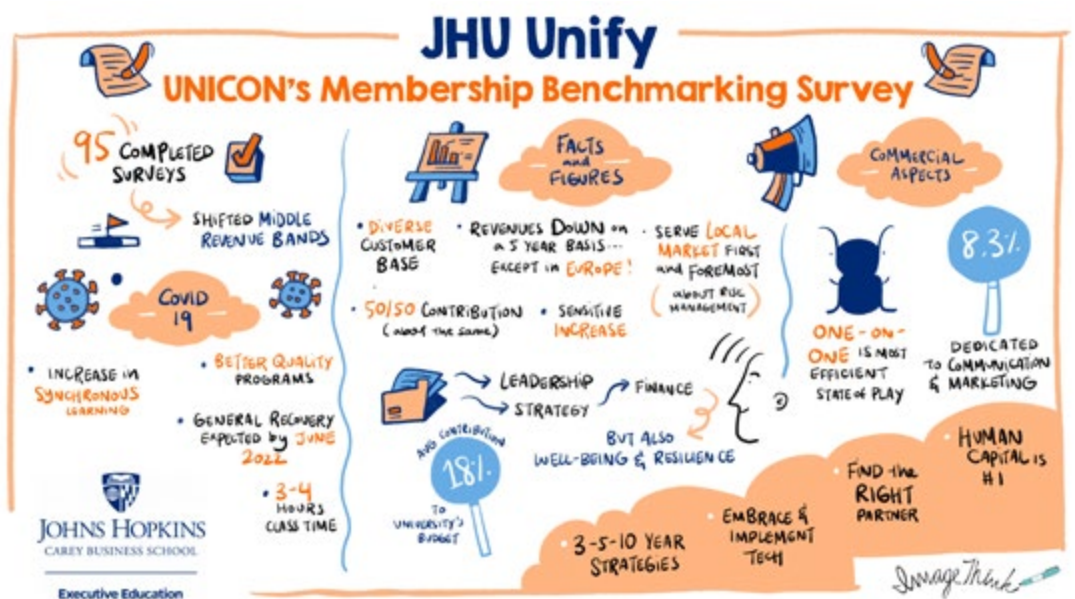
Mark Lewis layered a macro context over these survey findings, drawing attention to how historical events and technological changes have always impacted the sector. Looking at a timeline from 1986 to present day he showed that, "Every 10 years or so there is major disruption," from operation Desert Storm, to the dot com tech bubble, from 9/11, to the '08 financial crisis, to Ebola, and now Covid-19—and tracking along the same timeline we see the emergence of new technologies, from the web, to Facebook, Skype, and now Zoom. "Industry has always

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been able to make adjustments," Lewis assures. As we think strategically about executive education, Lewis concludes, we may perhaps consider that our strategies will tend to have a natural time horizon of three to five or ten years—based on historical precedent. With the future of work squarely at the top of the executive education agenda in 2022, this observation on the focus and scope of strategic thinking, is a timely one.

From the macro back to the micro of greater accessibility in executive education, the survey data reveals an increasingly diverse customer base across the sector. Four in every ten participants are now female, for example. Interestingly, director level and professional level individuals represent the large majority of all participants—at roughly 80%. The 15-20% segment of C-level participants is lower than a general perception of who 'exec ed' serves, would tell us.

The Rise of Digital

In the first of three concurrent sessions, David Lefevre, Director of the EdTech Lab at Imperial College Business School, and Charlotte von Essen, Director of Academic Engagement at Insendi—discussed executive education's digital response to the pandemic—and posed questions on what this accelerated digitalization means moving forward.

David Lefevre prompted us first to ask ourselves, "What was the trend at that time—back in February 2020, around how EdTech was being implemented?"

In 2019 and early 2020—in customized executive education—the picture was one of clients pulling business schools incrementally towards digitally enhanced education, as requests for more digital components in programs increased. Corporate clients were looking at ways to ensure the learning that occurred within a small team intervention (for senior leaders for example) could be passed on more broadly to the organization at different levels—and digital dissemination was part of the discussion on possible solutions. Even before the pandemic then, many executive education teams were starting to consider how they could best meet this growing demand. There were on-going conversations on how to retain value and impact within digitally-enhanced programs.

On the open enrolment side companies like Emeritus, GetSmarter, Esme Learning and others, were establishing a market for open short courses. These companies were often highly skilled in digital marketing, and have grown significantly since, becoming very well-resourced.

Considering this long-term five year trend, there was already an acceleration in the adoption of EdTech in executive education. "The market demand was there, present and accelerating," says Lefevre. Next came the pandemic, and, as we all know, the acceleration went into hyperdrive.

Shaping Online Environments

Von Essen describes how Insendi, partnering with executive education providers to offer digital learning solutions, witnessed an intense period of experimentation and product development as the effect of lockdowns and remote working kicked in globally. The result for von Essen and Insendi was a feedback loop played on fast-forward, with real-time feedback fuelling quick iteration and continual improvement. "Development timelines were shorter," she tells us. "Efficiency of learning was key for time-strapped executives so we concentrated on impactful learning with intensity. We designed in days rather than units or sessions—three days might be too intense, but five days spread across evenings might be better, as we found participants less inclined to take days off to learn. User experience was paramount—everything needed to be clean and simple to navigate, fewer clicks, less lengthy readings." In pre-pandemic times, just how long it would take to harvest so much user testing data is hard to fathom.

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The process von Essen describes reveals a level of learner-centricity hitherto rarely seen in executive education—and where previously aspired to, never so ravenously fed by user feedback. There was a huge focus, she recalls, on, "maximizing each piece of contact time between learners and faculty. We looked for open-minded, inventive, creative solutions to maximise the time faculty had with participants." Part of that was encouraging providers to think of digital learning 'beyond zoom teaching', which, she says, represented, "a mindset shift," for many.

Another lesson that soon emerged from von Essen and Insendi's tight feedback loop, was a clear understanding that retaining a networking aspect in online delivery was going to be integral. They addressed this with increased group work and discussion elements, and an innovation trend to watch next year will surely be around expanding this toolkit to meet the ever-present need for networking opportunities in executive education, even while engaging remotely.

Past and Future Trends

During Q&A, Shalini Bhatia of Stanford Graduate School of Business raises a fundamental point for many when it comes to digital learning—which is that of intentionality in its use. "There's a time and a place for digital," she says, heeding instructional designers to ask, "What are the goals and objectives for a specific population? This will be pivotal as we think about digital vs. physical in executive education."

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Accessibility, yes, but ensuring that it is done in a high-quality way.

For Lefevre the digitization of education is a long-term trend, "We are 15 years into it, and it will continue to pan out for next 15 years," he predicts. It's a trend he sees continuing to plot along its innovation life cycle, with ever-increasing process innovation, product innovation, and improved results for stakeholders. The pandemic has simply served to push that plotline much further along than it would have been. "We come out of the pandemic with hybrid a definite part of our portfolios," Lefevre surmises, "and over time the efficiency and quality of those products will steadily improve."

The next trend—closely interrelated to that of digitization—is the use of analytics and AI in online learning. An outcome of increased digitization is the amassing of, "large data footprints in learning," notes Lefevre, "and people will make better use of that." Lefevre sees a move towards, "a digital education system where we have a complete data footprint across much of what we do—with greater insights into what is happening in our programs, around what is working, what is having an impact, how can we make precise adjustments, and how can we more accurately measure impact."

Online Learning Design

This theme of digital as a gateway to increasing access to learning, at all stages of life, is built upon by David Wood, Executive, Board Chair and Faculty, Ivey Business School at Western University, in the second concurrent session of Day One.

For Wood, the period of experimentation and innovation described by Lefevre and von Essen in designing digital learning platforms, was absolutely mirrored by innovation on the teaching and learning side. This period has profoundly improved education in four areas: delivery of the fundamentals, enhanced individual preparation, a more engaged learning team experience, and an elevated classroom discussion.

As faculty director of Ivey Business School's accelerated MBA Wood is deeply interested in the accessibility online affords. "How does technology create the ability to engage with students at a distance, at a different pace, and on a different schedule—and how do we do that with quality and in a way that will excite our participants and clients?" Accessibility, yes, but ensuring that it is done in a high-quality way.

Wood emphasises a learning curve that will chime with many in attendance, "When all of us were put in this position to move online, the focus was almost exclusively on teaching and learning activities—how do we move onto Zoom, how do we replicate the classroom, how do we use polling for engagement?"

For Wood the key to progressing past this nascent stage was in shifting the focus to 'online learning design'. "We needed to enhance the experience," he explains, "Not just replace the classroom, but to make the experience better."

As with design in any discipline this shift required process, and for Wood, step one of the process was to, "Refocus on the learning objectives. Our faculty went away and wrote learning objectives—not just for the overall course, but for every single class."

The process revealed a great deal for Wood and his team; for instance, they discovered that, "The use of evaluation and feedback was very different. Feedback becomes more important in the online setting, evaluation perhaps less so—and the way you provide that feedback in a timely and unique way is crucial."

Replicating the classroom experience in Zoom then, was soon found to be ineffective—there was too much screen time, too much energy drained, and fatigue for all involved. The way out of this negative pattern was to combine live delivery with some asynchronous elements. In practice this might mean the first live session was an introduction, "not to teach the content but to explain the importance and relevance of the concepts." Video or reading material around those principles and theories or models could then be deployed, for students to digest in their own time. Finally, activities for participants to practice making use of those concepts.

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Wood's online learning design was built around a teaching plan structure of: Knowledge —as the foundation, with layers then built on top of: Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and finally Solutions. According to Wood's findings, the bulk of the synchronous work (and when safely available, face-to-face) should be focused around the top three levels where it can add the most value and achieve the best outcomes.

Accessibility Barriers

If the rise and rise of digital and the creative use of new technology is a force for greater accessibility in executive education, then one opposing force has been the spread of the virus itself, and its impact on access to campus—whether that be through lockdowns, vaccine mandates, and the challenge of keeping every learner safe.

In a third concurrent session of Day One, Stacey B. Lee, Associate Professor of Practice, Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, hosted a thought-provoking session on the lasting implications for higher-education—which, for Lee, are considerable, "Seldom has the law had such a direct impact on how life on campus works," she states, adding that this will have, "One of the most profound implications on higher education in the past 100 years."

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Stacey B. Lee, Associate Professor of Practice, Johns Hopkins Carey Business School

Lee's research focuses on how Covid-19 has affected the employer/employee relationship—in regulatory and legal terms, and with its impact on the Disabilities Act, and on religious freedoms too.

Lee's presentation maps the development, state-by-state, of U.S. legislation on vaccines, and mask-wearing requirements. Lee also provided a before-and-after look at the U.S. higher education landscape, from the 10-25% drop in enrolments, to the $4.5 billion investment globally in EdTech in just the first half of 2020. Lee's picture takes us from higher education as an analogue, on-campus world, where degree-focused learning is the default—to today's scenery of digital, online learning, with career-focused offerings at the fulcrum of competition in the sector. The landscape has transformed.

Following her presentation Lee posed a series of discussion questions, urging new thinking by conference attendees, working in breakout groups, around issues of accessibility in executive education—such as:

▶ **The pandemic has led to increased price sensitivities, with students starting to delineate between the cost of education and the cost of the university experience. What will the impact be?**

▶ **The challenges of remote learning are not distributed equally. In what way has this 'digital divide,' that limits the options of students in poorer, rural communities, who are not served by broadband access, affected higher education?**

▶ **With fewer resources available for lower- and middle-income families, there is pressure to keep tuition flat. How should higher education institutions react?**

The ensuing discussions highlighted the challenge executive leaders have been faced with and continue to face, in determining how to balance the financial implications, student experience, safety, and equitable access to high quality education.

Day One Wrap Up

Day One of conference, taken in the round, served as a timely reminder that university-based executive education has been and can continue to be, a leader and innovator in increasing access to executive learning and development, as well being well positioned to access new markets for growth.

"The disintegration into component learning parts," mused Dean Triantis, describing the direction of travel in higher education, away from the degree as the 'standard unit of packaging,' "or the creation of new building modules—depending how one wishes to view it—has been underway for many years in the domain of corporate and executive education. Executive education has in many ways represented the sandbox where higher education disruptors are operating."'

This rigorous period of experimentation and hard work by dedicated teams across the supply side of university-based executive education, coupled with the power of new technologies, points plainly towards an opening up of access to high quality learning, for individuals at all stages of their lives and careers—as well as greater scope for the business of executive education to access new markets and grow.

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Alex Triantis, Dean of the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School
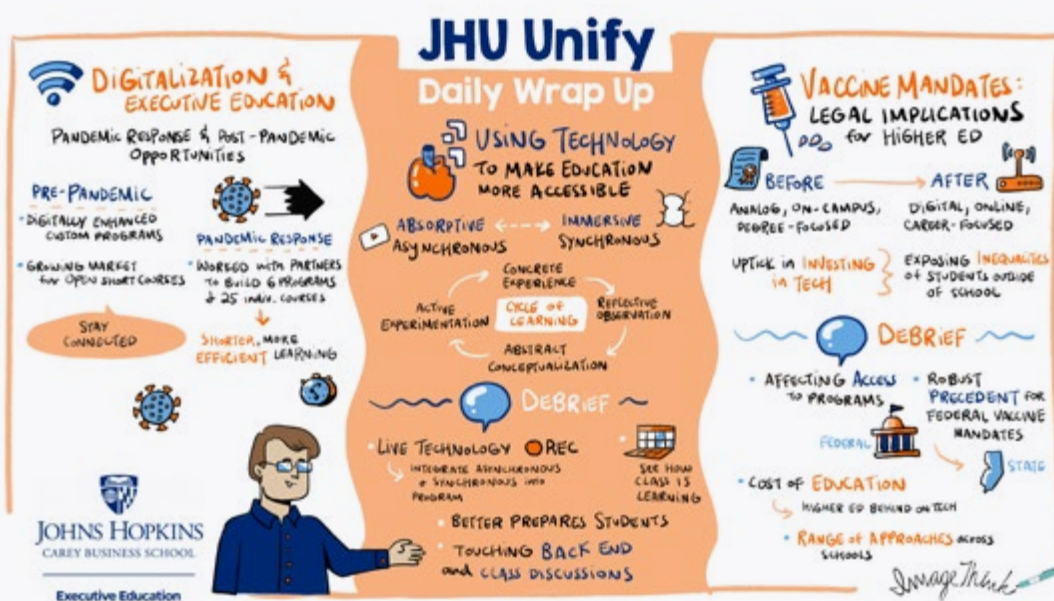
The challenge of course is that the same technology powering these trends, can also be a constraint to overcome: from 'Zoom fatigue', to unequal access to technology, to knowing when face-to-face is a nice-to-have or a need-to-have—there are many hard problems to solve along the way. One thing is for sure: the sector and the people working within it—strengthened by their experiences since early 2020—have never been better equipped and primed to solve them.

DAY TWO: FLEXIBILITY

The central theme for Day Two of UNICON's annual Team Development conference is flexibility—a state and quality which those in attendance have adopted to unprecedented levels across the past two years. As Chris G. Myers, Associate Professor and Academic Director of Executive Education at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School submits, "The pandemic has caused all of our tolerance for change to go up dramatically. Ideas, innovations, and changes we would have fought vehemently against 18 months ago are now accepted readily out of necessity. Whether from participants, corporations, faculty or staff, we've seen a huge willingness to engage flexibility in the work of delivering executive education."

The goal of Day Two then is to unpack and process those various forms of flexibility, and begin to identify which ideas, innovations and changes might be retained as useful. Where has flexibility opened up new opportunities in the marketplace? Where has positive behavioural change emerged for individuals, or improvements in ways of working for teams and institutions? Where has flexibility revealed routes to achieving better products and better outcomes for learners?

"Sometimes flexibility means 'making do'," observes Myers, "accepting we can't have the resources, structures or habits we might be used to and embracing substitutes that get the job done, even if they aren't our preference. Other times flexibility can be a wilful 'letting go,'—being willing to revisit our old assumptions, and over-reliance on the status-quo—to embrace new ways of doing things that aren't just adequate substitutes, but are novel, innovative ways of succeeding in a new market. The rapid pivot to online learning served not only to backfill gaps in our programming needs, but also revealed new ways of thinking about the structure and pacing of business education, that resulted in not just different approaches, but better ways of doing things."

Day Two examines both these types of flexibility—with the intention of capturing and retaining the 'letting go' forms, rather than sufficing with the 'making do' versions—and to assess possible new tools and practices that might help navigate the unfolding landscape of executive education.

Strategic Thinking

Markus Frank, Director of Custom Programs at Executive School of Management, University of St. Gallen, encourages a macro look at the global executive education market—from the university-based providers represented at conference to their competitors, from fast-growing digital providers, to large professional services firms, to in-house corporate universities—and to consider the relative market share of each. "What did we see in the past two years? In 2020 there was a 30% drop in university-based executive education. A nice recovery in 2021, but we are not yet where we were," Frank states with candour and clarity. "We have to think about our business model as a whole. What is our value proposition as university-based providers? Each school has to find its own answer to this question," says Frank, getting to the crux of the need now for greater flexibility in the sector.

University-based providers are faced today with a set of highly strategic questions to answer—the pivot from teaching to learning; the changing role of faculty—to facilitators and moderators; digital and online modes requiring new learning approaches; increased demand for personalization; technology enabling just-in-time learning; and growing access to new learner profiles and new markets to operate in. "We want to support you in this strategizing, and offer space and opportunity for the deep reflection it requires in the coming months and years," says Frank, describing his vision for the role UNICON will play in this important period of change.

Data-Driven Flexibility

"My first job in government was as a juvenile probation officer," recalls Beth Blauer, Associate Vice Provost for Public Sector Innovation at Johns Hopkins University and Associate Professor of Practice, Johns Hopkins Carey Business School. "It was here," she continues, "at the very frontlines of government, where I learned there is a beauty in the bureaucracy of government—that there was this opportunity, even in the lowest levels of government, to have a significant impact on the experience of living in communities." Blauer is scene-setting the absorbing story of her career which culminates in her current role leading the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center—with its now globally recognizable maps, dashboards, and data visualizations that did so much to improve common understanding of the virus through the pandemic.

"I was an out-spoken advocate for data sharing between government practitioners," Blauer recalls of her time in government, "I was trying to solve problems in the lives of children at the most vulnerable point in

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> **Markus Frank, Director of Custom Programs at Executive School of Management, University of St. Gallen**

their lives, with very limited information. I started thinking about how data can play a role in improving people's lives."

As she progressed through her career, Blauer began to oversee larger budgets and more resources and was able to convert her passion and advocacy for data-driven government into practice far more widely—working to enhance the ability of government agencies to share data in smarter ways, internally and externally, and improve outcomes on a greater scale. She began using data tools that, "scaled across almost every agency of the state, aligning to a core set of outcomes," she details. This was a hugely innovative movement at the time—and yet there was another even more dramatic movement yet to come. "Covid redefined our approach to data," says Blauer.

In the very early days of the pandemic, when it was still a nascent disease, Blauer discovered that the pre-eminent, first source of data on Covid was in fact housed within
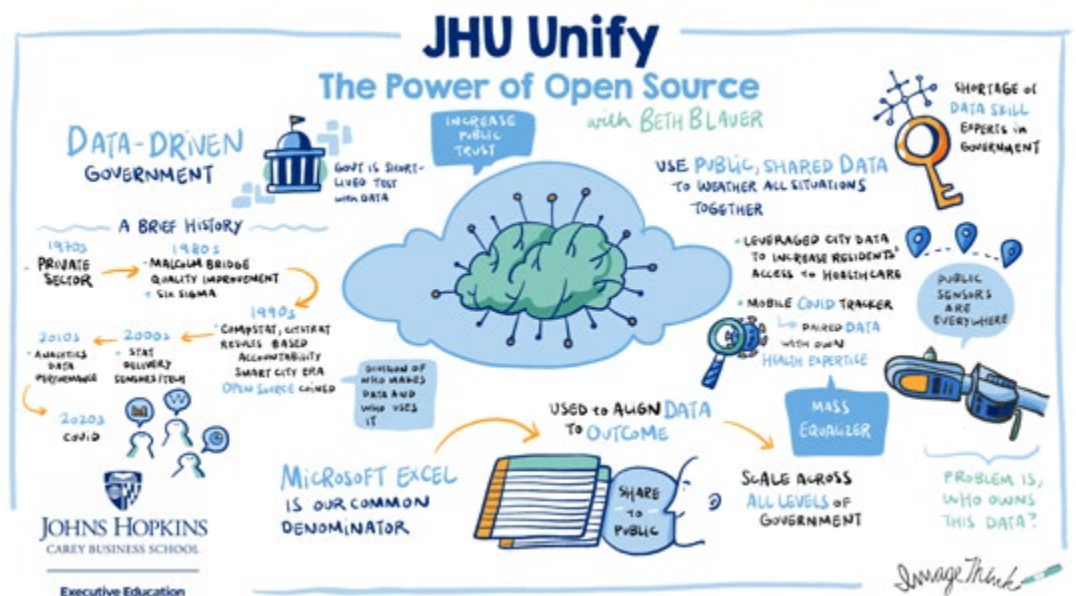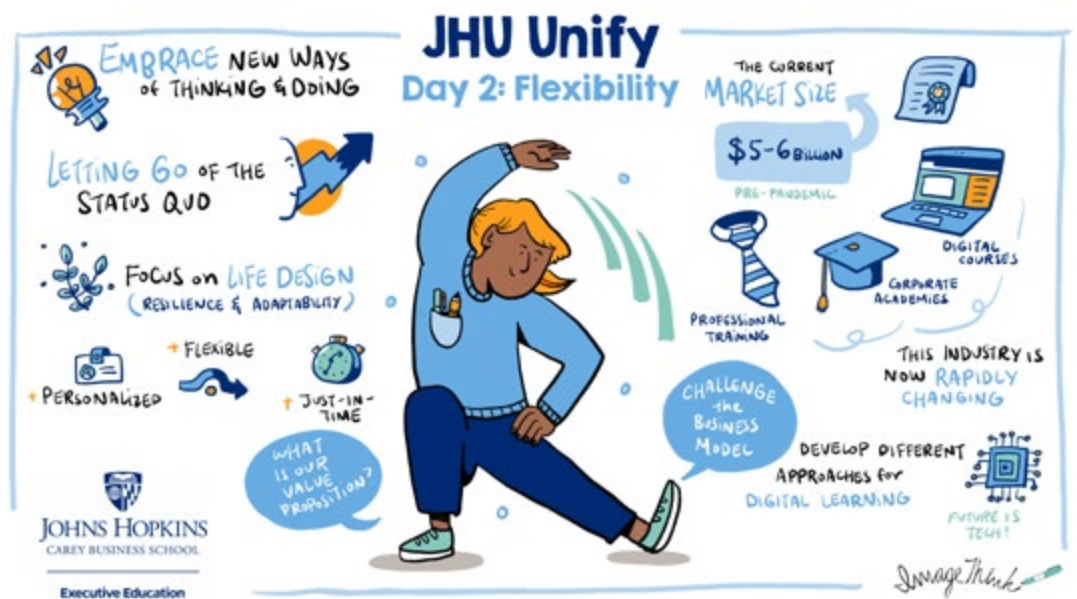
The Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center—with its now globally recognizable maps, dashboards, and data visualizations

her own institution, Johns Hopkins, where it was being managed by Dr Lauren Gardner and her team at the school of engineering. Blauer's first thought was, "How can we take the network of 250+ governments we have been working with, and start influencing public health decision making use of this data as a core. Within a matter of weeks, we saw almost every state and country take this tool and replicate it."

The tool was open for all, in the manner of open-source software, and it's dissemination culminated in 4.5 billion requests on the data per day, with the dashboards alone getting 3 billion views per day regularly.

Rarely has data entered the global zeitgeist in such a way, but here, with social sharing as wind in its sails, it did. "For the first time my parents understood what I did for a living," quips Blauer. "It became the equalizer. It was not just researchers who came to the information. It has been pivotal in the way we think about data as a public resource."

The arguments Blauer began forming as a probation officer have been soundly won, many times over. Few would disagree with her statement now that, "If we just equip people with the right information, they will make [better] decisions." It follows then that Blauer is now asking, "What happens next? Do we put the genie back in the bottle or do we think about what the next frontier of tools and resources will look like, that governments will need to manage the deep, penetrating health inequities and the flaws in our public health system the

" *Data should be embedded in any management course*

Beth Blauer, Associate Vice Provost for Public Sector Innovation at Johns Hopkins University and Associate Professor of Practice, Johns Hopkins Carey Business School.

pandemic has highlighted. There are huge opportunities to use data to help solve some of the biggest challenges, around poverty and the eradication of other diseases."

Blauer's experience—often pushing against antiquated processes and navigating the good and bad of bureaucracy—tells the story of the power of data, and reveals a wealth of insights, many of which can be readily applied by executives, and by executive educators too. "Data practice too often gets siloed off as performance management or process management," she advises, "it becomes disconnected with the realities of work and leadership, and disconnected from the frontline." To address this, "data should be embedded in any management course. It improves decisions, communication, impact evaluations—all critical skills." Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Blauer notes the importance of, "Listening with an empathetic ear and presenting data from a human perspective."

A Look in the Mirror

Bill Joiner, Sheri Moore, and Luigi Pecoraro, from the leadership team at SMU Cox Executive Education, led a session titled 'Serving Clients While Supporting Our Staff',

which concentrated on the flexibility being witnessed on-the-ground in executive education today, and how that internal flexibility effects delivery externally.

"How do we serve a more demanding customer, with a team that's in survival mode?" Joiner sets out at the start of the session. He characterizes 'survival mode' as a team under the pressure of multiple factors including; staff reductions, changing client expectations, faculty training (and re-training), technology shifts, the need for greater agility and responsiveness, and people working long hours, nights, and on Saturdays. How is operating in this reality impacting people in executive education? "We deliver around the topic of wellness for clients, but we also need to look at wellness for our own staff," he warns.

For Joiner it is the individuals working in executive education where the end focus of these pressures land—from external changes around the Covid environment, to macroeconomic, and geopolitical change impacting custom clients. "Instead of those pressures pushing in on us, how do we turn this around and take advantage of some of these changes as opportunities?" asks Joiner.

To switch from absorbing inward pressure to harnessing it is, for Joiner, a challenge of adaptation—which we can view as another form of flexibility. He quotes Jim Walter, the former CEO of AT&T, who said, "When the rate of change OUTSIDE the organization is greater than the rate of change INSIDE, the end is near."

> ## *How do we serve a more demanding customer, with a team that's in survival mode?*
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> **Bill Joiner, SMU Cox Executive Education**

Moore and Pecoraro lead an exercise around Janssen's 'four room' model of change, with participants asked to highlight which rooms they see themselves as occupying, as individuals and organizationally, at different points over the past two years. The four rooms are 'contentment' (defined as, "doing the job as it currently exists"); 'denial' (where there is, "a focus on the status quo, and blaming others"); 'confusion' (where, "something might feel off or wrong, but you're not sure what it is"); and finally 'renewal' (where, "creative change can happen, there is energy, radical ideas, and people are supported").

As Moore explains, the exercise helps reconcile our experience by understanding that, "Change is a constant cycle, and the faster we can move through these rooms as teams, the better we can function." The same model can also help teams understand what their clients are going through.

In thinking about the renewal 'room', and how to arrive there as quickly and often as possible—it is clear that many of the positive outcomes and states related to renewal, relate also to flexibility—the flexibility of creativity; being receptive and open to change; listening to and giving oxygen to radical ideas; and supporting staff by offering them greater flexibility.

Life Flexibility

Alayna Hayes, Senior Director of Life Design-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the Life Design Lab, Johns Hopkins University, describes Life Design as, "applying the innovation principles of design thinking to the 'wicked problem' of designing your life."

By way of contrast, a tame problem is one where there is a clear solution and an organized problem space to solve it in. Life Design is about wicked problems where there are multiple different 'solutions.' "You can take a number of different paths, make different decisions—and there are no clear answers. You can choose to live many different types of life, take different jobs, live in different locations—and all of them can be fulfilling," says Hayes.

The practice of Life Design is informed by the book 'Designing Your Life' by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans of Stanford University, who say, "Our goal for your life is rather simple: coherency. A coherent life is one lived in such a way that you can clearly connect the dots between three things: who you are, what you believe, and what you are doing."

One hurdle that can get in the way of this coherent life is the pervasiveness of 'dysfunctional beliefs', in all of us—unhelpful, untrue ideas that have a blocking effect on personal development. One common dysfunctional belief in the sphere of careers is; "Since I've graduated college and gotten into my chosen career, I've reached my peak—it's all downhill from here."

A key step to a more coherent life is to reframe dysfunctional beliefs like these—reframing being a central concept in design thinking, where it means looking at a problem from a different perspective.
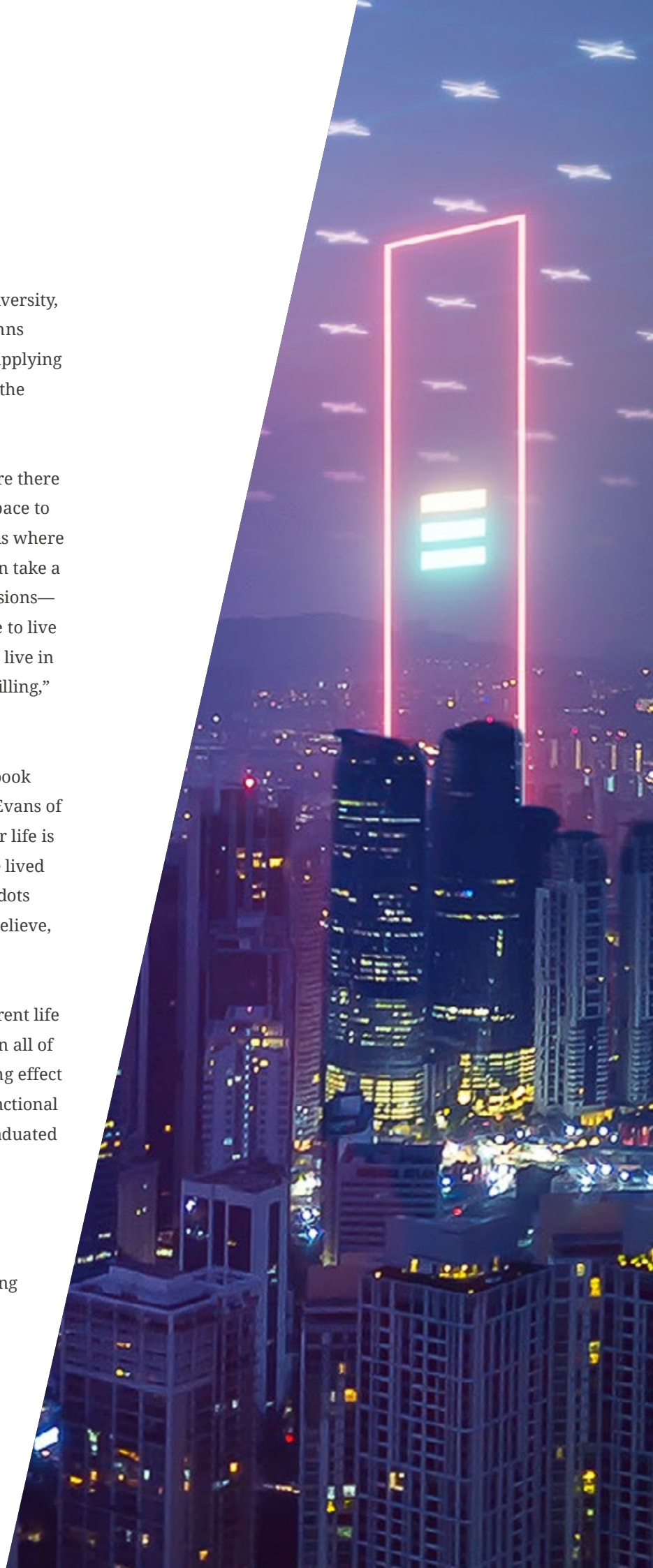
Hayes, along with Matthew Golden, Executive Director of the Life Design Lab at Johns Hopkins University, show us that to reframe the example dysfunctional belief given above, we might say, "As long as you can continue designing a life you love, you haven't reached your peak."

Another common example of a dysfunctional belief would be, "Once you are no longer a college student, you should know which direction to take your career. You're on a set path." For Hayes and Golden, this might be reframed as, "Just as your interests and values change, your career direction will continue to evolve. You may not always know where to go, but you can always know how to find your way."

We can start to see that 'reframing' is another form of flexibility. "By reframing these dysfunctional beliefs, we open ourselves up to inspiration and possibility," says Hayes.

Some inspiring words from Buddhist theologian Alan Watts are shared, encapsulating a set of dysfunctional beliefs around education and careers. "In music one doesn't make the end of a composition the point of the composition," Watts says in a recording, "If that was so the best conductors would be the ones that play fastest." Watts describes the linearity of our Western system of schooling, where everything is graded from kindergarten, through college, and out into the world of work—always with the 'goal' dangled one step

> **Life Design is about wicked problems where there are multiple different 'solutions.'**

ahead of the learner. "We thought that life by analogy was like a journey or a pilgrimage, that had a serious purpose at the end [...] but we missed the point the whole way along—it was a musical thing and you were supposed to sing or to dance while the music was being played."

In response to the dysfunctional beliefs highlighted by Watts, Golden suggests instead of asking, "What do you want be when you grow up," that we reframe to, "Who do you want to become as you grow forward?"

"No one has one peak," coaches Golden, "you have many peaks along the way, and peaks to come." The challenge and opportunity for executive education is how lifelong learning can help people reach those multiple peaks.

Flexing in Crisis

From the wicked problem of Life Design we move to the challenge of leading a hospital through the Covid-19 pandemic—a challenge akin to opening a box of new wicked problems at your desk each morning, with life and death stakes attached to many of them.

M. Shafeeq Ahmed, President of Howard County General Hospital and Assistant Professor at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, gave a rich recounting of his experiences doing just this, with direct insight into the unique challenges posed by an acute crisis—and especially around the implementation of change management principles in a highly pressurized environment.

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Throughout the pandemic, each day the set of problems arriving on Ahmed's desk would change, but some categories of problem were near constants; safety—knowing and establishing rules around infection control; managing a new virus with only limited knowledge of it; spiralling patient volumes—cancelling elective surgeries; dealing with the knock-ons from people not coming in for routine care; evolving patient needs; maintaining a facility as a Covid-safe environment; diagnostics—first coping without a test for Covid, and when it arrived, where should it be deployed; limited resources; snarl-ups in the global supply chain; staffing; vaccines; and communications to cover all of the above—while constantly balancing not wanting to panic people, while encouraging them to take precautions.

From this crucible of continual problem-solving Ahmed has emerged with a series of learnings. The first critical tool in the kitbag of his response at the hospital was the Hospital Incident Command System (HICS)—a leadership structure designed for dealing with emergencies. Implementing HICS provided the necessary leeway and authority to handle the crisis—while "bringing people to the table," that weren't typically connected with the executive team. HICS helped provide clarity around roles, who was in charge of which decisions, and helped avoid over-discussion or 'analysis paralysis,' where fast action was necessary.

Within this emergency leadership structure, much day-to-day problem-solving became related to the application of change management principles. As Ahmed notes, applying 'traditional' change management principles is, "pretty normal," in healthcare leadership—from leading change in new quality standards or safety protocols, to new healthcare programs rolled out in the hospital. Without the luxury of time afforded to such work in normal times though, it becomes 'express change management'—a phrase coined by Ahmed himself that reveals a great deal.

With 'express change management' you are limited by time and lacking information. "A crisis situation does not leave much time for adaptive consensus," says Ahmed, "you can't ask everyone how they feel about a change." Of course, juggling competing priorities is part of any leader's daily life, but in a crisis you are categorizing efforts by, "actions that address the threat most directly," and here the threat is serious illness and loss of life.

With these life/death stakes an ever-present in the problem-solving space, Ahmed counsels the importance of having a 'bias towards action'—which in turn requires enhanced trust. Part of achieving that trust will be in, "reassurance," says Ahmed, "reminding your people how safe you have been keeping them through the work you are all doing, checking in with people as regularly as possible, acknowledging fear and emotion wherever it arises."

For Ahmed, in a crisis the harder problems to overcome are those with an emotional component—those impacting on feelings, beliefs, habits—where the answers are not always obvious. In Ahmed's experience, technical challenges might often be easier—where there is a known solution and a route to implementation.

With these two types of problem in mind, Ahmed emphasises that flexibility in your leadership style is crucial, "There are times to be collaborative," he says, "and times to be directive." While seeking to achieve this flexibility leaders should still, "be unwavering in their goal," says Ahmed, "and invite everyone to help you reach it."

Day Two Wrap Up

If Day One's theme of accessibility trended towards the use of technology, Day Two's focus on flexibility trended towards practice—such as the practice around, "making sure we take care of ourselves and our teams, so we are prepared to meet the needs of our clients," notes Chris Myers.

Another area of practice that conference was asked to reflect on, lies in the flexibility required to, "meet our participants where they are," says Myers. "Some are coming to us on a peak, and some are coming off of a peak and stepping into a valley where a little more introspection and figuring out where to go next is needed. What are the tools and skills needed in executive education, to meet them where they are?" It is a learner-centric perspective, and a key note to end the day on.

A box of new wicked problems at your desk each morning, with life and death stakes attached to many of them.
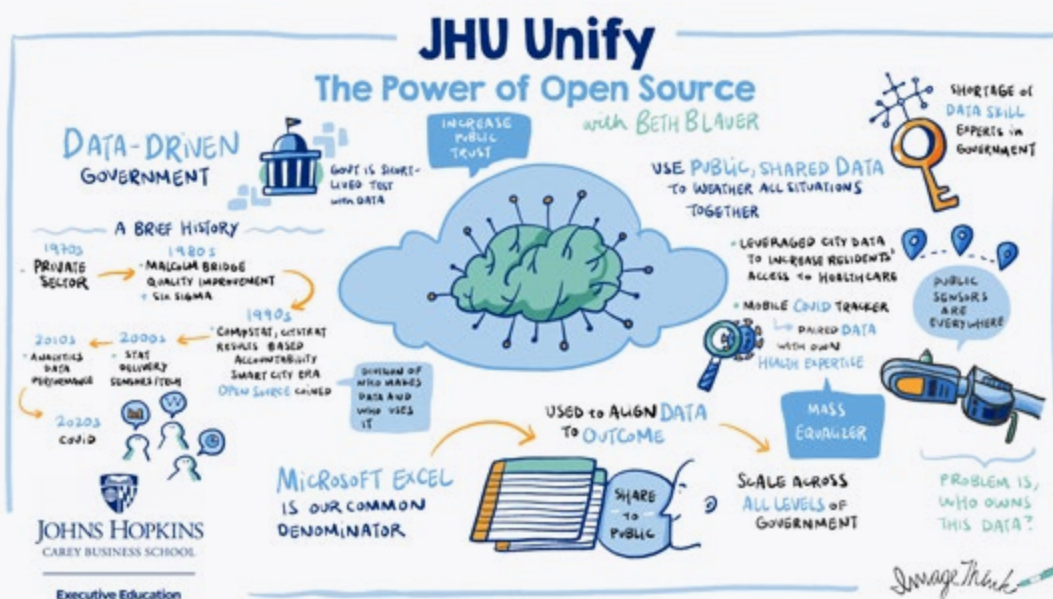
DAY THREE: SUSTAINABILITY

Following a period of marked transformation—such as we have seen in executive education in the period since early 2020—it is vital to take stock, look to the future, and consider which changes will sustain and which will be temporary. "How do we make some of the changes we have seen sustainable, and build a solid foundation for success in the new business models we may be adopting?" asks Chris Myers, introducing the theme for the final day of this year's annual UNICON Team Development conference—sustainability.

It is a theme chosen to encourage long-term thinking around executive education and to consider, as Myers suggests, the on-going, "availability of the core resources we need. To make sure we are not over-tapping our resource base and depleting ourselves and our organizations of the various materials we need to deliver successful products."

Conference is challenged to think strategically and ask, for their own business school, "how can we create a lasting identity and advantage in the market place?" and, "to look beyond the latest hot topics and fads and develop strategies to create long-term, sustainable success."

Executive Education 4.0

The first session of the day is hosted by Susan Cates and Mike Malefakis—two familiar faces in the world of executive education based on their time and

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*How do we make some of the changes we have seen sustainable*

Chris G. Myers, Associate Professor and Academic Director of Executive Education at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School

considerable contributions in leadership roles at some of the world's top business schools. Both now employed outside of business schools, but still very much embedded in learning and education, as part of the leadership team at investment firm Leeds Illuminate, who offer growth equity for education and workforce development, with an explicit 'impact' lens.

There are vanishingly few more qualified then, to present on the topic of sustainable business models in executive education—and particularly on forming partnerships, to complement core capabilities and help keep pace with customer expectations. The session aims to view the market with a wide lens, and to evaluate, as Susan Cates puts it, "opportunities for executive education to partner with entrepreneurial companies in the private sector, to continue to drive great learning and great impact."

The steady promulgation of digital technology use in learning over the last 20 years or so, has rocketed this year into an entirely new stratosphere. "Over the last year and a half, we have seen 15 years' worth of growth in 15 months. The pandemic has been a forcing function, breaking through resistance and hesitancy to try new things."

For Leeds Illuminate, as investors in the sector, these broken barriers to entry and participation in executive learning represents an enormous opportunity—and, as Cates urges, "it is an enormous
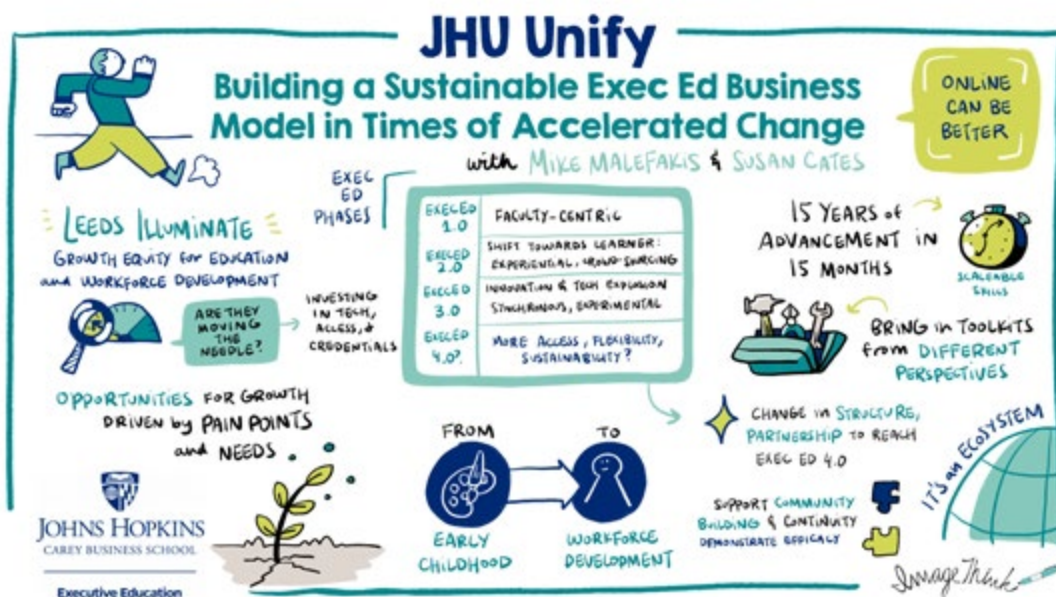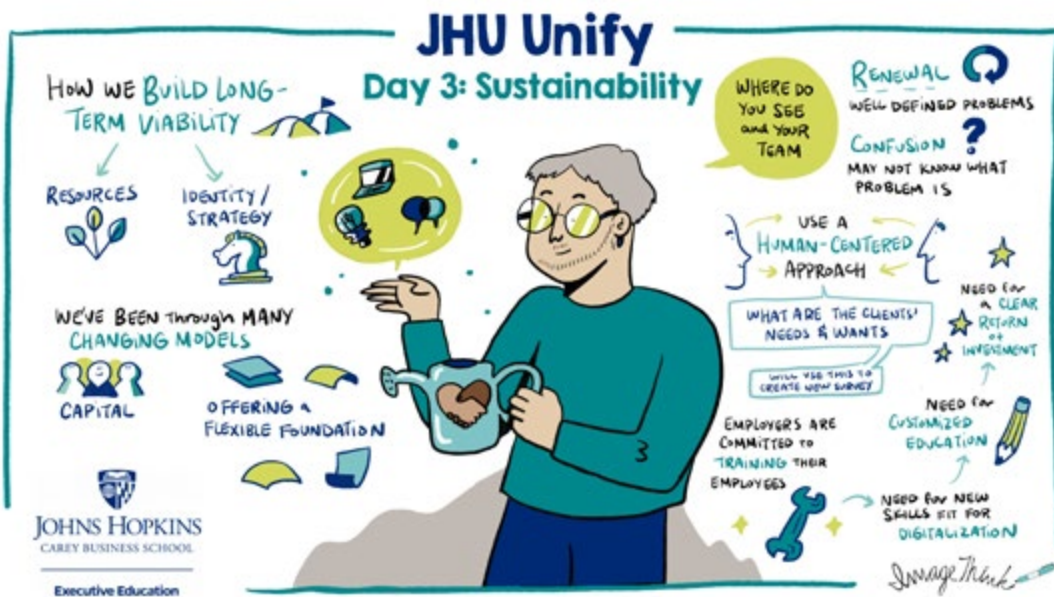
opportunity too for executive education, to be a guide and support for your clients, in bringing in toolkits and perspectives to help support the work you do as trusted advisors to your partner institutions."

"We have been in a crazy crucible of change and innovation and disruption," says Malefakis, "but some people think—'you ain't seen nothin' yet'—that we will see even more." Indeed, a snap poll inside the session shows a majority of UNICON members attending think more change is coming.

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The pandemic has been a forcing function, breaking through resistance and hesitancy to try new things.

Susan Cates, Managing Partner, Leeds Illuminate

For Malefakis, the story of executive education so far can be marked by three phases of development, that track across the timeline of UNICON's first 50 years—an anniversary that will be marked in 2022. The first phase was the longest, from 1972-2011. This was the original conception of executive education—with topics evolving over time, but modes of delivery by-and-large traditional, tried-and-true.

The second phase, Executive Education 2.0, runs from 2012-19, and was distinguished by a shift towards learner-centricity. In this phase various nascent forms of online learning emerged, primarily asynchronous and pre-recorded. "We survived the year of the MOOC!" recalls Malefakis, bringing to mind the prevailing debate of the time—whether executive education should, "circle the wagons or embrace MOOCs." Action-oriented learning appeared on the radar, and there was a general breakthrough in understanding around, "Knowledge and value existing not only in the person at the center of the stage, but from the people in the room attending too."

Executive Education 3.0 can be dated as the period 2020-present—and defined by the "explosion of innovation and tech adaptation," which has been well-documented, particularly at this conference, and which includes, "the embracing of synchronous learning; 100% online programs; iterative experimentation; new forms of virtual learner engagement such as AR and VR; programs based around simulations; the breaking of long formats into bite-sized modules spread over time; and a greater dependency on executive education staff's knowhow and expertise."

Malefakis sees an Executive Education 4.0 on the horizon—from around 2023 onwards. As this new phase draws into view, the questions for those at conference will be around, "How do we make executive education more accessible, flexible, sustainable, learner-centric, adaptable, resilient , impactful—and how do we continue to drive the pendulum further towards the learner, and their journey and needs." Those in the room today need to ask themselves, says Malefakis—as the designers and decision makers in the industry—"how can we recreate executive education to make it far better than it was in the past?"

From an investment standpoint Leeds Illuminate offers sharp insight into key trends and where the greatest innovation is taking place. "There are clearly tailwinds behind remote and more flexible work and how that changes the way people work and engage," says Cates, "and also how clients think about learning too, where we have moved through resistance to online."

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Keep iterating, keep communicating with each other, and benchmarking against each other—as that's how you're going to build Executive Education 4.0.

Mike Malefakis, Senior Advisor, Leeds Illuminate

Cates highlights the growth in community building tools for cohort-based learning; tools to aid continuity and support between events, for a more seamless and integrated experience, no matter where learners are accessing from. "We are looking for tools that are highly experiential, and that have demonstrated efficacy around behaviour change," Cates explains, "AR/VR is an area that is still under-utilized in real development. We see it in the teaching of technology and practical skills—but how can it be used in a scalable way around soft skills? There is an opportunity there."

Malefakis emphasises the importance of partnerships as a route to sustainable growth, "Most of us have to find partners to outsource some of what we want to do, where our partners can do it with more agility. As you build better executive education, what will you build at your own school and what will you work with an outside partner to build?"

"There is a huge wealth of knowledge in this community," Malefakis concludes, recognizing from personal experience the value of UNICON, "keep iterating, keep communicating with each other, and benchmarking against each other—as that's how you're going to build Executive Education 4.0."

Sustainable Human Capital

While Covid-19 continues to impact every aspect of the business world, organizations continue to re-evaluate their systems and processes—including those of their human capital. Josie Kang, Vice President of the Human Capital Leadership Institute in Singapore,

and Richard Smith, Professor of Practice and Vice Dean for Education and Partnerships at Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, convene a session on Day Three examining shifts in human capital, and the implications for executive education teams.

For Kang and Smith, the current reimagining of what a post-pandemic workplace could and should look like, is absolutely the time to reconsider our incumbent systems of human capital. In that current, prevailing model, we tend to think of organizations and their people as a talent pool—to be extracted from and made use of; to be filled with skills and capabilities; to attract and retain to; and to motivate and manage. These are all realities, but for Smith, "It's a mistake to stop there. We need to think about structure—for clarity and alignment, greater efficiency, and effectiveness. We need to think about culture—ways of working, common expectations, and shared values. We need to think about leadership—for alignment, direction, and strategy execution." Smith believes a fundamental change is needed around, "How we think about the human capital of the firm as a resource for competitive advantage."

Kang presents '10 Key Shifts in the Future of Learning', that are expected to have the greatest impact over next decade in the realm of human capital—they are: building digital skills; reinventing roles; developing soft skills; reskilling and upskilling; AI automation and jobs; blurring of employment; equality and diversity; climate change jobs; porous organizations; and agreed accreditation.

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> *As the reality of the future of work becomes clearer, L&D leaders will have an opportunity to reshape the human capital system.*

These shifts pose big questions for executive educators. "Who will be responsible for upskilling and reskilling?" asks Kang, "What skills will employers and employees want?

How might learning offerings need to adapt to new work structures? How can executive education support well-being, and help firms address mental health?" As the reality of the future of work becomes clearer, L&D leaders will have an opportunity to reshape the human capital system and provide answers and solutions that improve outcomes both for individual learners and organizations.

Microcredentials and Stackables

One possible solution to the urgent demand to upskill and reskill workforces—and to provide the just-in-time knowledge and skills necessary for individuals and businesses to stay competitive—is the rise of microcredentials and stackables. These stand-alone courses that can combine to eventually give you a formal degree, clearly address pain points and needs emanating from the demand side—but what

do they mean for traditional credentials like degrees?—are they in competition or can both live in harmony? David Sagen, Director National Executive Programmes at BI Norwegian Business School and Anne Swanberg, Associate Dean of Short Learning Modules and Associate Professor at BI Norwegian Business School, shed light on the issue in the final session of Day Three.

Sagen positions the world of traditional degree-focused education and the fast-changing world of business as 'two worlds colliding.' The world of business is calling for learning that is short and specific—while the world of academia traditionally offers learning that is comprehensive and general. The world of business wants relevant, 'just in time' learning—where academia tends toward the research-based and fundamental. Business has been asking for online, flexible learning—while academia has been reluctant in the past to depart from classroom-based offerings. Business wants valid, verifiable & recognized learning—where academia operates around a system of formal credits and degrees.

There are clear tensions here between the demand side and the supply side of executive education. For Sagen, the question to ask is, "do stackables and microcredentials offer a potential 'sweet spot' between business and academia, that could bring the two worlds together?" No doubt this is a question all business schools will be experimenting around in the coming months and years, as they look to create sustainable models for the future of executive education.

Day Three Wrap Up

"Prior to conference I was sceptical," confesses Richard Smith, Professor of Practice and Vice Dean for Education and Partnerships at Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, as he provides closing remarks on this year's conference. "I have seen higher education conferences in the past overplay the idea of business disruption. Eight years ago we were talking about the demise of the two year MBA, for example. I admit I was sceptical about our ability to rethink the business models of business schools. Could we use this conference as an opportunity to push the envelope towards change?"

The answer, from three days of conference with an intense focus on change—change in accessibility, flexibility as a force for change, and sustainable change—the answer is a resounding 'yes we can'. The next question, Smith asks, "Where do we go from here?"

In answer, Smith has four areas of future focus to leave us with—and a fitting conclusion to an information-rich and engaging three-day conference. The first focus area should be: partnerships—"as we face disruption challenges we are better off working together—sharing tools, developing ecosystems—partnerships make us stronger." Second: business models— "new offerings, new delivery means, new standards. The barriers to entering the market have lowered. It no longer takes a physical business school to host executive education—we need to up our game." Third: the mission— "what is the outcome we are striving for? What is the impact of our actions, and our offering in the long-run—are we creating a better society, are we creating the business leaders we need for the future?" Lastly, the final theme of conference: sustainability— "being mindful of our planet, and of our people."
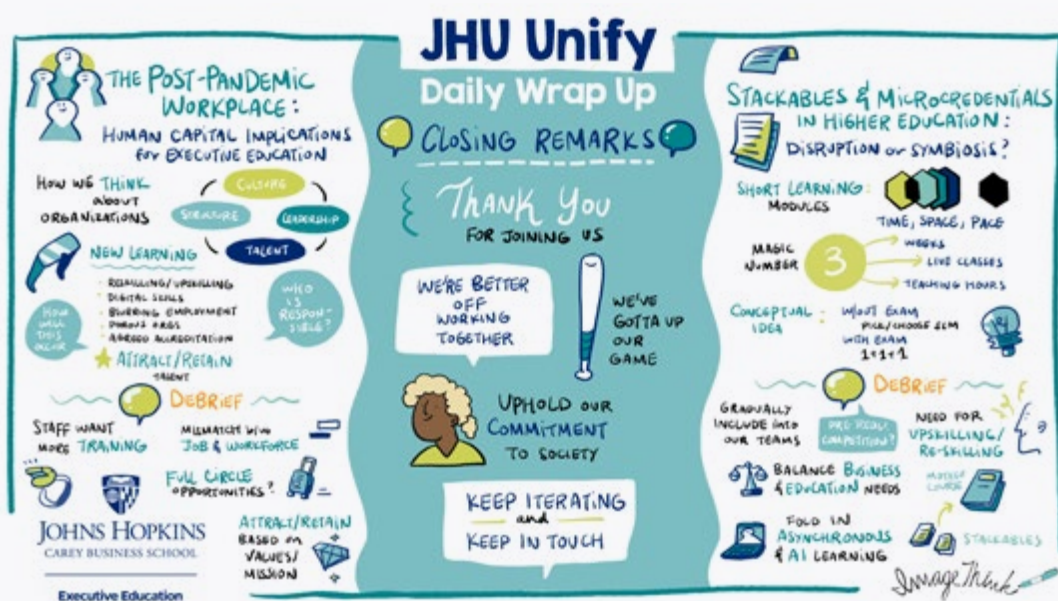
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