Hybrid Learning: The Post-Pandemic Landscape

Kim Maybar

UNICON Research Report

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UNICON Research Report: *Hybrid Learning: The Post-Pandemic Landscape*

UNICON sponsored this research initiative which was conducted by Kim Maybar, to help UNICON members gain a fuller understanding of the hybrid learning model in the executive education marketplace. While the use of hybrid learning grew significantly during the pandemic years, it continues to be an option as schools return to in-person deliveries. This report considers the dynamics that figure into decisions to pursue hybrid learning, from both the academic institution and client/learner perspectives. It addresses key considerations when considering the hybrid models, and surface inquiries for further reflection and consideration.

The interpretations and perspectives expressed in this report are those of the researcher, who is deeply familiar with the executive education field and has previously conducted UNICON Research on Corporate Universities.

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Executive Summary

This article examines the state of hybrid learning from three perspectives: surveys of senior learning leaders from private industry, interviews with executives setting learning and development strategies within corporations, consultants, university-based executive education programs, and current literature on the subject. The intent of this article is to assist the hybrid learning executive in assessing what is and is not working to help create a path forward. The COVID-19 global pandemic impacted the expectations of how we live, work and learn. As we emerge into a "new normal," hybrid learning trends developed and implemented during the pandemic will continue to develop and gain acceptance as people become more familiar and comfortable with the usage of these tools.

> "Thanks for agreeing to speak with me about the hybrid format."
>
> "Sure… But before we begin… Can you tell me what you mean by that?"

This exchange happened in approximately 85% of the 53 interviews undertaken for this article. The literature is replete with references to the vague definition of hybrid learning (US News and World Reports, 2016). In order to address the term hybrid learning, this article focuses on two usages of "hybrid programs"; those that utilize fully online and in-person modules, and hybrid classrooms in which dual audiences learn synchronously. These are the most common usages discussed by both industry and higher education professionals and therefore, are deemed to have critical priority.

As we emerge into a "new normal," the likelihood of a full return to the office seems unlikely, creating an environment ripe for hybrid learning. Hybrid learning was initially implemented to help people connect, learn, and for companies and universities to attract and retain talent during the pandemic. Multiple advantages, including reducing carbon footprint, maximizing potential learner pools, and more were revealed. The benefits attained by implementing a hybrid learning model appear to warrant its status as a permanent staple in the learning and development portfolio. A survey of the literature and interviews with professionals from the field indicate the same.

In contemplating next steps, the following are universal considerations:

- Even if hybrid learning is not the preferred format, it is currently the go-to back-up plan.
- Connectivity is uneven across the globe, limiting access to learning for certain geographies;

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- Up-skilling in online pedagogy and hardware/software usage is critical for ensuring that the back-up plan can happen;
- Companies are making investments in learning technology with an emphasis on user interface.
- Hybrid learning is here to stay.

With respect to hybrid learning there are some key takeaways:

- Technology is not yet at the point where learning professionals feel it can replace in-person learning in toto.
- Equality of learner experience (both online and on-site) is of great concern as presenters struggle to balance dual audiences and some virtual participants feeling as if they are “in the shadows”.
- Learner engagement and networking within programs is considered paramount.
- Interactivity is critical for engagement.
- Flexibility on multiple fronts holds great appeal for potential clients and participants.
- Design must take into account the least engaged and least technologically connected learner.
- Learner mindsets in hybrid learning (as with all learning) must be managed.
- Classroom norms must be established.
- Learning communities flourish with appropriate scaffolding.
- New skillsets are required for effective teaching and learning in the hybrid space.
- Many practitioners in the field of learning and development do not understand what “online pedagogy” actually is.

The research revealed recommendations for university-based Executive Education:

- Ensure that the content is current, relevant, practical, and applicable.
- Maximize entry opportunities, as well as the possibility to customize learning for a personalized learning journey.
- People participate largely to expand their networks; preference is for programs that maximize networking opportunities.
- Leverage alumni in programs as ambassadors.
- Knowledge of online pedagogy is critical to learner experience.
- Just as corporations are embracing new areas of learning, executive education programs must change and evolve to help participants stay abreast of best practices.

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Moving forward, university-based Executive Education's ability to lure participants back to campus is the top priority in the minds of university leaders so that revenue goals and needs can be met. In contrast, the ability to execute hybrid learning enables corporations to reduce costs, expand diversity in learner pools, and minimize their carbon footprints. Despite differences, these two groups share a common goal of inspiring and delivering impactful learning for participants. There remain challenges to the pursuit of the modality, including lack of institutional support, positive cultural regard, and gaps in requisite technology and online pedagogical savvy.

We come to a discussion of the hybrid classroom itself. While many of the key concepts of quality online pedagogy are similarly best practices in its location-based counterpart, there are considerations that are now receiving long over-due due attention for they are key to the pursuit of audience equity. Interactivity, engagement, and relevance are key foci of corporations as is a semblance of equity across audiences. One faculty interviewee noted, "*the more you engage people the more likely you will retain their attention; and the more likely they will value the experience*."

As the collective familiarity with the nuances of the hybrid space has grown, there is a heightened awareness of the challenges for effective design and delivery. Common amongst them are technology frustrations, disengagement during delivery, low interactivity, and equity between dual audiences. While these experiences have been challenging for some, those who have risen to the occasion appear to really enjoy the creativity that technology can offer. The Challenges section provides examples of innovative approaches and solutions.

Our Future Trends section lays out current and anticipated statistics addressing a range of topics from global connectivity and technology advances to learner demographics and other changes as per senior leadership and the literature.

Finally, our Reflections section brings to light researcher observations and a discussion of some future tending trends worthy of exploration.

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Introduction

The pandemic necessitated the shift to hybrid learning. With a dispersed workforce and pressing business and up-skilling needs, many interviewees reported organizational shifts to hybrid within a matter of days, if not a couple of weeks. Missteps were made, but much was learned.

Amongst learning and development leaders, this researcher discovered many examples of de facto learning communities, with Chief Learning Officers consulting with each other and faculty members sharing best practices both intra and inter company. Ironically, the social learning and community exchanges that occurred naturally define one of the very elements so critical within the hybrid environment.

The goal of this article is to collect the reflections and observations of those in the field. Many suggestions for best practices were graciously shared. There are actual examples articulated, yet the intention is for them to serve as a spark for creativity rather than a go-to resource.

> Imagine a scenario where participants introduce themselves to each other, speed-dating style. Some participants are online, some are in the room. Everyone is asked to share reflections on the statement "You get what you give," providing examples as possible. After a full cycle of introductions, the faculty member asks the audience for poignant observations, and then reflects on why this was presented as a topic in a newly-formed learning community.
>
> Picture a scenario when a dual-audience hybrid classroom watches a 5-minute thought-provoking video, and then its members are given the opportunity to set up virtual chat rooms around thoughts that emerged for them. 50 students, 10 chat rooms. If nobody enters a chat after a period of time, you release the space for someone else to claim it. Group conversations ensue. If someone decides they no longer wish to participate they quietly remove themselves and change rooms. After half an hour, bringing the group back together, people are provided with the space to share reflections that emerged for them, ideas that they did not have the opportunity to share, and comments worthy of note. The faculty member asks about practical takeaways, while moderating the entire time.

Although these examples are purely hypothetical, they demonstrate the potential for technology to build community and connections. Such engagement has been shown to lead to more meaningful and longer-lasting knowledge acquisition, always on the minds of focused learning professionals.

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Research Methods

Research for this article came from three disparate sources: 1) a survey of senior learning and development professionals centering on their hybrid portfolios, 2) 53 interviews of individuals in both the (university-based) Executive Education and the Learning and Development spheres and, 3) a review of current literature to assess context and best practices in the field.

The literature emphasized a time frame going forward from 2021. With the passage of time and increased comfort with technology, reflections on hybrid learning and its evolved potential are becoming clearer.

The survey of senior learning leaders was disseminated through a database of senior corporate learning leaders. While this approach did yield some results, the more effective route was a social media campaign on LinkedIn targeting Senior Learning and Development leaders. The pool was augmented by Research Committee members, sampling the opinions of 40 senior level learning professionals from industry. Our thanks to these members for their support. A summary of findings appears as Appendix A; a few items are worth mentioning:

- Approximately 43% of companies began hybrid learning since the pandemic, with an additional 27% having started it within the past 3-5 years;
- The average portfolio percentage in the last 12 months (as of April 2022) was 65%; for the next 12 months the number drops to approximately 58%;
- Instructional Designers are receiving the most training in the fields of hybrid technology and pedagogy, followed by Facilitators;
- In this order, business conflicts, learner distractions, and inconsistent camera usage affect participant bonding.

The virtual interviews were targeted to Chief Learning Officers, education technologists, and Executive Education leaders. Interviews were secured via numerous approaches, including the author's own network, outreach via LinkedIn, and the invaluable guidance and support of the UNICON liaison. The interviews focused on descriptions of institutional practices, program design, and the interviewees' own experiences and observations of the format and its impact on learners. Specific examples of best practices were collected to address what conditions were most promising for hybrid impact, strategies for its usage, and innovative approaches and experiments that led to promising findings. Finally, future trends and expectations were discussed.

Findings from the three disparate methodologies are integrated throughout this article in the hope that this approach helps to create additional context for the themes that emerge and spark ideas for innovation.

Definition

"Hybrid learning is *an educational model where some students attend class in-person, while others join the class virtually from home."* (Boyarsky, 2020)

***"Hybrid learning** is where students learn through a mix of in-person and online activities."* (Acadly, 2022)

Although there are many well-recognized attributes of technology-based learning, there is not a common definition for hybrid learning. Multiple sources lament this deficiency. (Placeholder2) Whereas some claim the term "hybrid" pertains to a single session (a.k.a., "hybrid classroom"), others note that the term can be applied to a variety of modalities and formats (i.e., asynchronous/synchronous, online/non-virtual, co-located/dispersed, etc.) One reference listed at least seven different approaches falling under the domain of "hybrid learning":

- Hybrid classrooms, synchronous programs with virtual and on-site participants (most common usage);
- Flipped classrooms, with synchronously co-located and/or hybrid audiences.
- Blended bichronous learning, where learners use the online platform both synchronously and asynchronously.
- Blended asynchronous - hybrid classrooms with recorded lectures for those who cannot attend synchronously.
- Co-located participants/virtual faculty.
- Blended asynchronous - classes where part of the program is live and part is asynchronous;
- Connected classrooms, (also called synchronous distributed model): where groups of students from various locations log in to one central location where faculty is presenting to a cohort (Top Hat, 2022).

Interviewees also had different perspectives. When deviations from the standard usage of hybrid – as in hybrid classroom – were referenced, they supplied clarifications:

- *Minimum group size in multiple locations is also a type of hybrid, but not usually the hybrid we think about which is when some people are virtual and some people are in person. For me, hybrid means some of the participants will be in the classroom, some will be online. That's for me, a hybrid class. Hybrid, which I would also call blended, means I have virtual interventions, and I have face to face interventions.*

Another definition emerged during the interviews: that of hyflex, which offers participants the choice of how to participate. The decision as to how to participate is made either on a session-by-session basis or at the beginning of the program. It was most often mentioned as an accommodation for pandemic-related participant hesitancy towards in-person learning. *"We want to acknowledge that not everybody's comfortable gathering in groups yet."*

For purposes of this article, we are defining hybrid learning as learning that has both in-person and online components, regardless of concurrence. We do this for two reasons: universities have already invested in both technology and staff for its implementation and the usage of both formats have earned the sustained credibility of employers and learners alike.

Best Practices in Hybrid Learning Design

During the interview process, there were many comments referencing misunderstandings of "online pedagogy." Even though it is a key component of effective online learning it is often misunderstood by those reporting to senior leaders in the field. It is not as simple as transferring a lesson plan to the online context. The best online learning environment is attentive to several components; considering the individual learner experience, the need for psychological safety between participants, and strategies to inspire intrinsic motivation, connection and growth.

Learning Experience Design

Learning Experience Design combines learning science with user design. It takes into account the learner experience and helps guide designers to create communities that foster connection and engagement. Key tenets of this approach include:

- A holistic, interdisciplinary approach;
- A platform around principles and practices that expressly ensure that the learning journey is enjoyable, engaging, relevant, and informative;
- Focusing on both content (ID approach) and user experience (UX approach);
- Experiential learning being at the heart of LXD;

- Having a human-centered approach. You have to understand your audience and their unique needs before you design the course;
- LXD takes into account the realities of learners, meeting them where they are, including the environment where they are learning. (Shift eLearning, n.d.)

An example of Learner Experience Design issues emerging from the interviews are:

- *Why would the students even bother engaging with this? How is this meaningful to them? How is it exciting? How does it resonate with them? Why would they bother showing up? There are mechanisms for designing learning experiences that drive intrinsic motivation.*

- *The students want to be able to see China with their own eyes.*

Community Scaffolding

According to Bell Hooks, "as a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence." (Hooks, 1994) A hybrid environment must maximize the use of time synchronously spent, allowing participants ample opportunity to interact with each other in meaningful ways, to foster bonding and psychological safety amongst participants. Interviewees spoke of the joys of bonding and frustration in its absence:

- *We have been talking about ways to get people to share their tips or tricks and hacks. There are some groups within this organization where they have teams set up and people are very open. And willing to like ask questions and other people respond. And there are other groups, like one of the groups I'm working with is regulatory affairs…They're nice enough and they'll tell you stuff, but they would be hesitant to like make it public that they have a question to share…*

- *Where we have had really great success is where we create support groups for the managers where we have organizations and they can work together, because it doesn't matter what I say, if there is a manager that says it or agrees with what I'm saying, then the battle is won.*

- *I want to be here. I have skin in the game, because I'm connected to these people, I feel seen, I feel heard, I feel motivated. I don't want to let people down. Therefore, I stay. And of course, there is more to the engagement formula, because it also*

matters that the experience is designed well. That the content is relevant, that we have opportunities to present ourselves as individuals, to present our identities…

- *As a faculty member, we have to be able to look at it from the angle that it is its own entity, and respect the learners for where they are, where they're learning from, what they're learning in the classroom, and how to create that connection. And that inclusion with I mean, you and I need to be able to be in a breakout room together, you and I need to be able to be in a small chat.*

Ensuring Authenticity and Humanity

- *30 years ago, certain participants would say, "Don't ask me what I think that's not your business. Don't ask me what my emotional concerns are."*
  The context is different now. Feelings are acknowledged. Mental wellness is considered to be of utmost importance, especially as many remote workers have experienced isolation and depression during the pandemic.

- *What can we do to make meaningful connections with each other? For most people feel better belonging to a tribe.*

- *[W]e do not want to create additional self-consciousness, right, but we do want to encourage some amount of let down your guard so you can have some fun with each other.*

- *We acknowledge that you have, you know, all this experience. And even if it's in a different field or you live in a different country, your experience is valued.*

Personalization of Learning

One example of an Advanced Management Program reviewed not only offers both online modules, but also has created a series of electives, allowing the learner to design their own learning experience to their preferences and their schedule. This has definite appeal, and is able to satisfy learner motivation as it arises. As an additional benefit, the program allows individuals to begin their journey throughout the year, rather than waiting for their assigned cohort to begin.

The personalization of learning and development budgets, often made possible with an expanded budget, enables corporate learning divisions to address learner needs in a multitude of ways. This not only expands the number of programs offered, but also the variety. Personalized learning journeys were continually referenced in interviews; the challenge is to match both learner bandwidth (i.e., workload and personal life constraints) with the professional

development they so desire thus providing a development path forward. A survey undertaken by ThinkImpact revealed that ”91% of employees prefer having employee-specific training, with the opinion that it is more beneficial and relevant, and 75% of training professionals believe their companies are taking steps to achieve that in the future.” (Think Impact, 2022) Another estimate claimed 55% of learning leaders are spending more than one-quarter of their time reevaluating their program portfolios. (CGS Enterprise Learning Report, 2022)

- *[T]he one-size-fits all concept is fundamentally dead. That’s the hard part. You have to think about experience through the eyes of many different personas meeting at the same time. Historically, we have been talking about a remote learning experience or in-class experience. Now, experience has to accommodate diversity of learning style, engagement style and attendance model.* (Indiana University, Microsoft + Steelcase Explore Hybrid Learning, 2022)

- *They could do it in 12 hours, or they could do it in 40 hours doesn't really matter to us, but we're trying to get them ready, because we've noticed a lot of people, even with business backgrounds that are 10 years out need more support.*

- *We are really trying to be sensitive to the needs of the learner. Sometimes they just want 5 minutes of training, maybe work life or home life is nuts. And sometimes they are ready for longer stints. We make sure to check in on them regularly to see where they are, and our training has to fall into line with that*.

Hybrid Learning Technology

From a purely technological standpoint, the standard hybrid classroom environment has three cameras: one focused on the material, one focused on the on-site learners, and one focused on the presenter. (Schiano, 2021) In addition, most interviewees confirmed that they use a video producer or classroom monitor to ensure that virtual participants have the maximum presence possible, sorting out technological difficulties, monitoring chat rooms for questions and comments, and addressing other concerns that may arise.

From an engagement perspective, several faculty members mentioned acknowledging the virtual audience:

- *I did acknowledge we have all these great people who at this point in time, couldn't be here I acknowledged them. I made a point of cold calling them but warning them, like, let's go over to the Zoom world, so that they could go, oh, you know, the professor's coming over here…*

- *I said folks, listen, right. So, this is happening; we cannot control this. I will do my best to design the workshops in a way that we get the maximum value out of it. Let's get feedback every time to see what we can do differently and then do better. Let's all acknowledge that this was not our choice. It is what it is right.*

Schiano suggests that "you don't need to spend a lot of time discussing the hybrid process if you prefer not to; however, it is helpful to narrate what you are doing, explain why when appropriate, empathize with students' struggles, and remind them of the benefits."

Hybrid Now

Context

A confluence of factors began in 2019-20 that created the "ideal storm" for the adoption of hybrid learning. The COVID-19 pandemic had a massive impact on operations globally. For most, the scenario was largely unforeseen, and learning operations were no exception. Many employees became remote workers overnight:

> *I did not send my kids to school. I came in and emptied out my office of the things I needed. I made sure I took all my coffee reserves. Just in case. Over the weekend it was confirmed: we're going virtual, for whatever, however long is. There was no universal plan; there were no institutional resources that said what we can use and what was already established.*

Subsequently, the "Great Resignation" of 47 million Americans began in 2021, creating a large gap between job opportunities and available candidates. With the shortage, and talent dispersed around the globe (and not eager to return to the office), a reevaluation of the importance of being on-site began.

We always knew we were going to go virtual; this just sped up the process.

Our survey of 40 senior learning leaders indicated that 42% of portfolios (17 respondents) first introduced the format during the pandemic.

During the pandemic and beyond, Learning Professionals have reported increased influence on and access to the C-suite. (LinkedIn, 2022) Collaboration with other divisions skyrocketed, with improved integration with other organizational systems and initiatives. As a result of this newfound recognition from both change management and financial perspectives, senior learning and development professionals are being held accountable for larger goals, accompanied by requisite measurements. Budgets were increasing and investments were being made in LMS systems and other technologies. As per a Capterra survey,

> "[R]emote businesses are pouring money into L&D and L&D tech in particular—93% of remote HR leaders who are increasing their L&D budget in 2022 plan to spend more on learning and training technology. As businesses continue to migrate to hybrid and remote work (82% of company leaders plan to let their employees work from home at least some of the time post-pandemic), expect L&D investment to continue to balloon to meet virtual training needs. (Westfall, 2022)

One key measure that has been correlated with improved recruitment and retention metrics for business is continued professional development. With its characteristic lack of geographic limitations, hybrid programs make continued development of a dispersed workforce possible. Interviewees revealed a plethora of additional business goals that hybrid programming addresses nicely, including:

Upskilling New Populations	Decreasing Carbon Footprint
Learning in the Flow of Work	Reducing Expenses
Ease of Dissemination	Minimizing Time Away
Geographical Flexibility	Meeting Upskilling Targets
Cultural Inclusion	Emotional Wellness

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Executive Education Context

Many executive education divisions quickly pivoted their portfolios to online in a matter of days. It was perceived to be the only available alternative, and there was a sense among faculty that having learning take place online (at least in part) was "*better than nothing*."

Requisite infrastructure was not always on standby. One estimate in the literature claimed that prior to the pandemic, approximately 4.3% of a university's budget was allocated to Information Technology. (2017 Educause Core Data Service Benchmarking Report, 2018). For the 2022 academic year, we find higher education at the bottom of the list for expected total budget change (+0.3% on average). The good news, however, for the higher education CIO is that the IT budget is expected to increase considerably more than the total budget (+2.7% on average), indicating a continued shift toward more IT spending." (Lowendahl, 2021)

Universities across the globe were affected differently by the pandemic. International, federal, and local regulations dictated in a non-uniform manner the number of participants who were permitted to engage in person and under what circumstances. What was clear, however, is that learning needed to continue. Furthermore, colleges and universities still had expenses to meet.

The "pivot," as it is so often called, also presented challenges in the classrooms. The literature has revealed that the two key components of successful online learning are faculty training in online pedagogy and technology. Yet the availability of, compliance with, and faculty willingness to participate in such trainings varied widely, especially for executive education divisions, who were often secondary to the for-credit programs. Many program directors and faculty members did not have the initial know-how to hit the ground running.

Learner Context

The transition to a remote working format was an adjustment for employee-learners just as it was with the other two ecosystem members. New technologies were initially a challenge, but as learners became more facile with the platforms remote work productivity increased. As per a PriceWaterhouseCoopers survey, 73% of employers in June 2020 claimed that remote work was working; in 2021, the number had climbed to 83%. In part, this was due to the adjustment to their new environments; users were also becoming more comfortable with the technology. (Molla, 2022)

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Adding to these benefits, the geographic boundarylessness of the hybrid learning format creates access to hybrid programs. Through the interviews, four different examples of individuals who were now able to engage in professional development emerged:

- A learner who doesn't feel comfortable speaking up as a result of her cultural background, but is eager to engage in the chat room;
- A woman whose family responsibilities preclude her from travel, but not from imagining an improved professional life;
- A person with a physical attribute that precludes them from being fully present in a face-to-face environment;
- Someone immune-compromised and/or recently stricken with COVIID.

As enhanced opportunities for learning have emerged, the desire to do so in different formats has also revealed itself. The need to ensure that program length, content and design are an optimal fit is critical to both learner engagement and program completion.

Hybrid Learning Team

Leaders

Leaders of both corporations and Executive Education divisions are continually trying to ascertain the most beneficial way forward for learning and for their organizations. The process requires a culture fostering innovation and creativity and allowing for missteps as part of the learning process.

It's easier if you think that you're going to learn something, and it can be fun, and you'll have a sense of accomplishment at the end of it. Or, alternatively, the Zoom stayed up, and the whole experiment didn't explode.

It's expensive to adopt and change technologies. But like at the biggest level, our learning management system is part of a talent management system. The idea of that makes sense, so you can have performance management tied into what learning resources are available in practice.

The literature is clear that faculty confidence is the most important factor for success in the hybrid classroom. Second is their facility with and positive regard for technology. Most institutional leaders interviewed revealed that there are university-supported processes in place for securing the pedagogical and technological skills this requires; that being said, the resources are not always leveraged to maximum potential due to issues of personal preference and loosely enforced compliance.

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Hybrid classroom facilitators need some very distinct skills from the average executive education presenter. The facilitator's job is to ensure that the experience is as similar for both cohorts as possible. This drive for equality was mentioned very regularly in the interviews.

> *You turn to the people on screen and chat with them a little bit, during the break, just like you're chatting with people in the . You're making sure that you're turning and facing them, making sure that you're calling on the people making sure that they're introduced Some of those kinds of simple facilitation practices are so easy to forget or ignore when you get going in your classroom and there's these people on screen. I think we've trained faculty even more effectively.*

However, for maximum impact in the hybrid learning context, facilitators themselves must also be ready to learn. Especially in academia, faculty acclimation to the hybrid classroom varies widely. Those who fall into the "early adopter" category have been doing it for years, and may have been previously called upon to test various programs and systems for usability and effectiveness on a voluntary basis, giving feedback along the way. They become ambassadors for their colleagues and peers. On the other end of the continuum are professors who may need more convincing. There may be many factors contributing to this reluctance. Some are individually based-- some interviewees have suggested it's generational; others have pointed to mindset. Faculty deference to research-proven methods often precludes rapid adoption, as does a hesitancy towards experimentation. On the other hand, an instructional designer from a for-profit institution aptly parallels this with the mentality of business.

Multiple faculty members have expressed how reliant they are on staff in the room (virtual or face-to-face) to monitor multiple items – technical issues, the chat box, people who may be virtual who have questions or comments, and the like. *"It's a real collaboration. I've encouraged them to tell me what's working, what's not working, and*

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what I'm missing. Because I cannot see everything." For example, in one instance there was a puzzling technology glitch in the middle of a session. Five minutes later, a workaround was applied using a hack found by the staff member on Reddit. Problem solved; crisis averted.

Professional Staff

It's been said by staff that "the devil is in the details." One key responsibility that falls squarely on the shoulders of professional staff in executive education is the learner experience, which, as previously described, seeks to optimize all touchpoints that a learner has with the university, from application through program close. *"We're looking to provide a seven-star experience!"*

There are many examples of great coordination in practice. One interviewee noted that she takes great care when assigning people to their breakout cohorts, considering levels of achievement and other social, demographic, and organizationally-relevant factors to facilitate bonding.

Responsibilities are doubled in a hybrid classroom environment, as the staff are dealing with two distinct audiences, for the duration of the program. Furthermore, opportunities need to be created for ample interaction.

If you have teams of people who are participating from an organization and some of them are not in the room physically and some are, you've got to structure your exercises differently, you've got twice the support to do in terms of that.

On that note, staff members may be deeply engaged in instructional design, working alongside faculty. Some have been newly trained in instructional design, an area often lacking within their department. They have also needed to become more technologically adept with LMS systems, whether it is their own institution or the client's. This helps ensure that they can be highly responsive as needs arise. As a result of all of these new responsibilities, upskilling amongst staff has become a necessity for strong and effective program delivery.

In addition to having the requisite skillsets, staff also needs certain personal attributes. When asked to describe the qualities of a successful collaborator- agility, emotional

intelligence, and enthusiasm were mentioned. The willingness to go the extra mile – whether championing a particular activity to faculty or learning instructional design skills to improve programming – was deemed critical. Indeed, professional staff are also the ears on the ground for identifying opportunities to operationalize processes. This helps in training future staff members, upskill successors, and ensure high standards across programs.

The Hybrid Learning Portfolio

As per UNICON's 2020-21 Benchmarking survey,

> [O]ver 95% of schools report 100% fully Synchronous delivery, 93% a blend between Asynchronous and Synchronous delivery, 76% blended digital and face-to-face and 65% fully Asynchronous. With an exception of blended digital with face-to-face, which decreased 5%, all other digital formats increased in usage from 2019- 20. Small (breakout) group discussions and presentations are the most used and highest rated in terms of effectiveness. Realtime chat for questions, comments and discussions is the second most used and tied for second in terms of effectiveness. Simulations, is the second-highest methodology rated in terms of effectiveness, but is last in regard to usage. The use of simulations has grown significantly in the past year, with 15% more school reporting implementation in 2020-21.

Those well-schooled in learning science who were consulted for this report repeatedly emphasized that for quality learning, the medium is irrelevant. That being said, with physical, financial, and other contextual constraints, trends have emerged to qualify the usage of each method, especially in light of the participant-limiting constraints of COVID. A full list of considerations appears as Appendix B.

The commitment to pursuing an online context varied across the executive education ecosystem. Corporations were quick to invest in learning technologies, and continue to do so. Therefore, virtual participation will be a constant in some format. Learners were delighted by the opportunity to pursue learning in a hybrid format, and enjoyed the flexibility and choices it offers. On the other hand, many executive education divisions prefer to bring as much learning back to campus as possible, as there are facilities and operational costs that would be better covered with in-person attendance in programs.

In-person programs at corporations have become shorter and more concentrated, with generally less emphasis on knowledge and a larger emphasis on networking. With large numbers of people working virtually, many may not have the opportunity to meet their colleagues in person; the occasion to do so leads to engagement and team bonding.

As a result, attendance becomes mandatory in these instances. "If the program needs to be in person and you are in the target population, you need to figure out how to get there." Similar sentiments were echoed among executive education divisions.

Shorter in-person sessions also allow brick and mortar facilities to remain usable. Companies that have a more dispersed workforce are finding ways to bring employees together in centralized locations. References to bringing people together in major metropolitan areas, in hotels, bowling alleys, and other creative spaces are being pursued to keep talent connected and engaged despite the distance.

University faculty and staff have other considerations when determining format of learning programs, and they vary across institutions. For modular programs, such as Advanced Management Practices, programs have been noted to begin both asynchronously and synchronously, both with the goal of familiarizing participants to course guidelines. When language difficulties are an issue, in-person learning can be most ideal. One common theme that has emerged in interviews is that for in-person components, attendance is mandatory (although some participants have had to shift their attendance to their living quarters when COVID-19 reared its ugly head.

Generally speaking, executive education divisions seek a return to campus, where higher fees help offset fixed costs, including conference centers and dining services. However, with the temporary transition to online learning, programs are being re-evaluated and modularized differently. While a number of universities still maintain a hybrid classroom, others have established the prerequisite for physical attendance at in-person sessions. Moving forward, the lure back to campus is expected to reduce the number of sessions online, but is unlikely to eradicate them entirely from the portfolio.

Corporations

While some have said that the ability to build community is medium-agnostic, others contend that when you do hybrid, "you're asking for disaster, doing everything badly." There is a general acknowledgement that in its current format, it is difficult to manage dual audiences equitably. That being said, the format isn't summarily being erased from portfolios. In open enrollment and custom program spaces, hybrid learning is considered a resource.

Open Enrollment

There are a number of factors that companies consider when outsourcing hybrid learning in an open enrollment context.

One being the scheduling of the programs, both in terms of time of year and time of day. Some interviewed maintain portfolios of similar programs, and when the target participant is ready, the start date (and participant preference) is a factor. The location of the program may also be an issue, as live classes that are way off time-zone can be difficult. Furthermore, programs that are closer to the office can be seen as more palatable.

The networking component is important as well and is a chief benefit that companies seek. Companies want to know that their employee has the opportunity to forge meaningful relationships with their peers in other organizations, despite a partially virtual context. Many noted the importance of “breaking bread,” “having a beer,” and “ax-throwing” as activities that are impossible virtually.

The general perception from multiple interviewees is that it is largely the senior leaders who are returning to campus. While the hybrid format can be good for schedules, networking with peers becomes more and more critical, and schedules become more flexible the higher within the organizational hierarchy one sits.

The leaders interviewed also noted they were looking for programs where individualized learning could take place. An emphasis was placed on programs that are learner-centric, as opposed to content-centric, although very specialized programs might be of interest. As an example, the Center for Creative Leadership was cited for producing graduates who come away from a program transformed due to personalized assessments, coaching, and a self-reflective culture. AMP programs were also referenced. Affinity was expressed for programs that provide a clear implementation plan for return to office.

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Customized Learning Programs

Hybrid Learning was used during the pandemic because the alternative was to cease executive development, which was not considered a viable option. Content had to be modified. The hybrid learning format, with its reduced costs, allows a greater number of individuals to receive training. Local universities are often considered the go-to for hybrid learning because of proximity, so at least some employees are able to be live. Participants can also get out of the office and away from distractions. Alliance Programs that engage a vendor for a period of months are established through vetting processes.

Executive Education

University faculty and staff have other considerations when determining the format of learning programs and vary across institutions. For modular programs, such as Advanced Management Practices (AMP), programs have been noted to begin both asynchronously and synchronously, both with the goal of familiarizing participants to course guidelines. When language difficulties are an issue, in-person learning can be most ideal. One common theme that has emerged in interviews is that for in-person components, attendance is mandatory (although some participants have had to shift their attendance to their living quarters when COVID-19 reared its ugly head.

While some universities have continued to offer hybrid AMP programs, or other types of modular programs, others have continued to hold full-time, in-person programs. The varying preferences are due, in part, to several factors, including language challenges, work and non-work responsibilities, and the desire to re-socialize. Many learners have felt isolated during the pandemic, and the opportunity to turn off and network for an extended period of time with their peers is attractive as is the opportunity to travel.

The Hybrid Program: Unique Scenarios

Managing the Dual Audience

When the size of the virtual audience is small, some corporate facilitators have everyone log in to the Zoom link so that they can engage everyone at once. Many faculty have the assistance of virtual producers in the room to help manage the chat as well as any questions that may arise during the program. During program breaks, virtual participants should have ways to interact with both faculty members and their fellow on-site participants. This can also be done via coffee breaks in the morning, etc.

- *How do we make sure it's not just about those people who are co- located but bringing in everybody?*

- *We need to be treating them all equally. We've got so many people who are just kind of doing it without any background in this or really even know that it's a problem.*

- *[I]f we kind of played to them, rather than isolating them, and we sort of tried to pull them in to be part of the class we would dramatically kind of draw the questions. 'So, Nate, give us give us a sense of how you see things from your perspective…' There'd be the Zoom, the PC screen and then we also had an elevated screen. So, depending on how we ran Zoom, they might be up on the screen. And everyone would just turn and look at them and God, it worked!*

One rule of thumb repeatedly presented is that faculty attention be divided according to the fraction of the whole class they comprise. Another was to alternate cohort contributors, beginning the session with someone from the virtual audience. Finally, several presenters have everyone log on to the Zoom site, regardless of physical location, to even the playing field.

Usage of Breakout Rooms: Many individuals interviewed have mentioned that engaging all participants in breakout room discussions can be difficult. Disengagement occurs in various ways, from virtual participants shutting off their cameras, message checking, and even refusal to enter the environment to begin with. *It is best to make clear to everyone what the expectations for Zoom audience are. It is not a place for participants to come and go as they please.*

Several strategies have been mentioned to help alleviate this hurdle. Some are employed during program planning: one academic administrator takes careful time with planning group compositions, ensuring that members will feel like they are among their peers. A corporate executive noted that when one employee outranks the others, the group feels pressured to follow that executive's lead. But this can be equally true in other circumstances.

Another is capping the number of participants in each breakout room. *"We really quite literally think about what size does this group need to be. If one of them steps away, another will feel like they have permission to step away, because the other five will just handle it. But*

if it's just three of them, it's like "Oh, I might actually put this pair in a bad position." If you don't have roles for 8 people, you won't have 8 people participating…"

During the program itself, there are strategies that can be employed to foster engagement. Some cohorts are blatantly told, "*You will feel uncomfortable in the breakout rooms*," to help manage mindsets. At another institution, participants are put on iPads and brought into the breakout rooms where they "sit on the table." This encourages interactions between virtual and on-site cohorts.

Informal Virtual Interface Opportunities

- *I'm really seeing a new interface and, in that interface, lounging in a channel, which is an informal learning, social learning setting.*

- *I connect with people who live two doors down here, and I WhatsApp them. I think it's how we engage with each other now. And by using technology, we're able to build relationships beyond the confines of time and space. And that leads to more engagement.*

- *What we have done is to create a platform that Hive platform that we orchestrate for them to post topics that you want to discuss topics you didn't understand, or prefer a deeper dive. We're using technology.*

Kari Whipple notes, "If class members are going to genuinely engage topics and each other, then the community requires diverse conversation spaces such as group chats, online forums, or group podcast assignments." (Whipple, 2021) Not only did these conversations take place during class time, but also on virtual communities located on Hive, Discourse, Heartbeat, and LinkedIn groups. Also suggested was Kumospace.

Hybrid Challenges

Technology

Hardware/Software

There have been numerous issues with IT as delivery has become even more tech-reliant. First and foremost, the shift to online learning came at a time when individuals did not have the necessary equipment for effective online learning, such as cameras and microphones. Organizations were not adequately prepared to host hybrid programs, and had to do so relatively quickly, although at times the proper equipment was lacking. And even when it wasn't, the setup was not always familiar to personnel, and/or conducive to optimize the virtual learners' involvement.

Whether it is issues of data privacy and security, inadequate features, or another element there were many changes necessities by the shift. Some were quite expensive; in one case, the vendor's data did not align with the software being used throughout the organization, so despite the large expense changes were made. At times, vendor contracts kept organizations locked in to their current technologies, causing great frustration; when shifts did happen, those impacted also expressed their grievances. At times the motivation to learn new programs was external, as when custom clients were not allowed to use technologies that were not aligned with their own, causing faculty and staff to quickly adjust.

Bandwidth issues affected connectivity and participation; the ability to engage and access content was not always possible, and mobile phones, a very useful tool, were not always viable substitutes. When user interface was poor, it was especially disheartening for virtual learners.

Intermittent Connectivity

"Europe has the world's highest concentration of countries with the fastest internet. Six of the top 10 countries with the fastest internet are in Europe. Iceland has the fastest broadband in Europe and the world an average speed of 216.56Mbps. Liechtenstein, Andorra, Luxembourg and France are not too far behind. The UK is in 27th place with an average speed of 72. 06Mbps. In Asia, Taiwan (4) Japan (6), Singapore (9) and Hong Kong (15) have the fastest broadband speeds with South Korea in 23rd place. The US (8) has the fastest broadband in the Americas with an average speed of 118.01Mbps. Canada (14) is the

region's second-fastest with Chile (21) and Uruguay (33) in third and fourth respectively. Cuba (174) has the slowest internet in the Americas. Africa is some distance behind the rest of the world when it comes to broadband provision. 30 of the 50 slowest countries in the world are located in Africa. Rwanda (38) has the fastest internet in Africa followed by South Africa (68), Madagascar (87) and Nigeria (97)." (Atlas & Boots, 2022) A global speed map can be seen in Appendix C

Any site where our simulation will be run had to go through a series of tests to verify connectivity. And if you're going to have a hotel-based model, the hotel needed to check the compatibility boxes. And there were a lot of challenges in some of the foreign countries.

The Human Element

The Virtual Participant Disadvantage

It was the consensus of our group that we should not try to do hybrid, because the customer experience would be so different.

I want all the learners to have that same experience, that same shared experience. I mean, otherwise they can just do it alone. But you want it to be equal, and that's hard.

The inability to see body language of virtual learners makes other cues increasingly important, especially if cameras are not live. Technology biases can also yield unintended consequences. Learner comments and questions that are communicated in ways that are not easily noted by facilitators (chat boxes, raised virtual hands, etc.) can go unrecognized and unshared. All of these components can contribute to an "in group – out group" dynamic, which can upset the sense of community critical for the hybrid context, causing disengagement of the virtual audience in multiple ways.

More than a few interviewees who manage hybrid classrooms expressed an element of urgency when technology glitches became apparent. There appeared to be a so-called "time warp," when delays felt as if they were taking longer to resolve than they actually were. Reference was made to the brief time actually lost; perhaps this is due to the proclivity towards disengagement for those Zooming in.

Distractions

One estimate suggests that 33% of knowledge workers have experienced decreases in attention span since the start of the pandemic; a research study revealed that the impact of a shorter attention span and lower level of concentration hits harder on online learners[1]. While leveraging learning in the flow of work can yield benefits, it has also been shown to prevent learners from fully engaging, as client and manager emails may be simultaneously coming across their screens. Zoom fatigue has also proven to play a role in the distractibility of learners. Any multi-tasking precludes effective engagement and collaboration.

- *There is no time travel unfortunately. And so, the way we have to do it is by you know, recording sessions and having it available on demand.*

- *We're really kind of early on in trying to make sure that we're increasing our accessibility sort of across the board for all of our learning. But it's a lot to think about when you're designing it and a lot to think about when you're delivering it. It's just, it's hard. It's so much stuff.*

Biases

Numerous biases must be recognized in the hybrid environment, and the extent to which faculty and corporate learning professionals have acknowledged them varies. Mentioned repeatedly were proximity bias and location bias. The proximity bias may have faculty naturally focused on the in-person group in front of them. Location bias also exists, which is the assumption that if a learner is not present, they are not as engaged or motivated.

Both corporate and academic facilitators have expressed incredible concern about "forgetting" their virtual audience. One interviewee noted, *"I think the tangible feeling of being virtual is like a shadow."* Although this is especially likely to happen when that audience does not comprise a sizeable percentage of the class. A commitment to equal experiences permeated the interviews.

Which brings us to the topic of camera and microphone usage, or lack thereof. One interviewee noted that her decision to leave her camera off is equalizing, as race and gender prejudices are removed if she contributes to the conversation via chat. Yet not using one's

[1] May, S. G. (2020). The excess of content and the decreasing attention span in students Get our Weekly. 1–5.

web camera has been shown to lead to being labeled “disengaged” by both faculty and staff interviewed, as well as corporate managers. A survey by Fortune in April 2022 found that “92% of executives agree that employees who are frequently muted or have their camera turned off during video calls probably don’t have a long-term future with their company.” Yet when questioned, employee reasons ranged from difficulties in focusing and embarrassment about their living situations to not liking seeing themselves on screen. Zoom fatigue is also an issue.

Corporate leaders and faculty alike discussed the challenges of not being able to see body language on camera. This leads to what has been called “non-verbal bias, which includes facial expressions, gestures, paralinguistics (such as loudness or tone of voice), body language, proxemics or personal space, eye gaze, haptics (touch), appearance, and artifacts,” can have an impact on faculty and classmate perceptions.

Facilitators must be aware of their own biases. The proximity bias may have faculty naturally focused on the in-person group in front of them, yet it is very important that everyone has the ability to contribute equally. Interestingly, one faculty member noted that this effect is more easily mitigated when the population online is a sizable percentage of total attendees.

Just as important, learners come to the hybrid environment with their own biases, before they even enter the hybrid classroom. Some may relate to their own anxiety about learning, the way in which they were selected to attend, and other discomforts. Learning how to address these stressors are key, especially when dealing with larger, more diverse populations.

Unfamiliarity with/Disdain for Online Pedagogy

The role of faculty in a hybrid classroom is very different from a purely face-to-face program. Their material must be more interactive, their role more of a curator of learner-constructed knowledge. Obviously, most have not earned their pedigrees in this way. The shift from subject matter expert to learner may not be an easy one for all. There are some who come to embrace a dual audience format wholeheartedly; for those that don’t, there are a variety of ways in which this knowledge is being transferred and built upon:

- *We have two all-faculty meetings a quarter based on teams. And I think we have a team of maybe 20 -25, online Deans that manage this large group of faculty that are in here, and they offer two faculty meetings a quarter. And then there are programmatic meetings once a quarter for them to come together and share. And then that week long professional development session is actually two full days, that's*

basically like, faculty driven conference three times a year. And then at the end of every, so that's between three quarters. And then at the end of the year, in December, our Office of Professional Development hosts an academic symposium that sort of sets the tone for what the next year is coming, and they bring in big speakers. And then again, it's more of those faculty sharing sessions.

- *In the beginning, we had training, we had technical and online pedagogy training, and in that we had a lot of peer-to-peer work, so we formed groups to help each other.*

- *Instead of one course, there should be a curriculum. It should be observations, there should be feedback, there should be mentorship, there should be more recognition.*

Moving forward, there are concerns about sustaining gains achieved with pandemic funds. *"I've heard time and again how university IT departments invest in technology, from software and hardware to new apps, but then grow frustrated because faculty don't use it. Even with countless workshops and events to educate and inspire faculty to get on board, by and large they remain uninterested."* (Janssen, 2021) If individual professors choose to deliver fully in-person moving forward, this technology will also sit unused. A recent survey suggested we have already moved away from hybrid classrooms in general and a larger focus on classroom technology and web conferencing tools. (Glenda Morgan, 2022)

Trends to Watch

It seems pretty self-evident that there are trends crucial to monitor in hybrid learning, such as improved speeds in internet connectivity that open new geographic markets, trends in the workforce's return to office (74% of U.S. companies are using or plan to implement a permanent hybrid work model as of 9/22/22) and developments in the ever-expanding marketplace of online Executive Education (see Appendix D). Others, however, require a bit more investigation, and it is the intention of this section to uncover some statistics worthy of note, as they relate to both higher education institutions and corporate learning and development initiatives.

Learning as a Process over Time

The concept of learning for the long haul is trending. "*I'm trying to get people to think about not only breaking programs up over weeks, but thinking fundamentally differently about learning in a way that appeals to participants is something that's going to emerge over a number of years*."

Other industry professionals concurred:

- *I think in total, over the course of three months, the group will be together for three days, but all the rest of it will be virtual. And I'm going to experiment with touch points, like smaller group dialogue, huddles…*

- *If I create a four-hour program, I'm pretty likely to get everyone through the entire four hours. And they will be exposed to all the content. If I just sign up for four or five one-hour pieces of that, will attendance drop off throughout?*

- *A lot of my career has been focused on performance, consulting the five moments of learning need, and so creating, for example, micro learning and online resource libraries, where people can kind of dip in as they need to get what they need when they need it. As opposed to you know, a three-day class.*

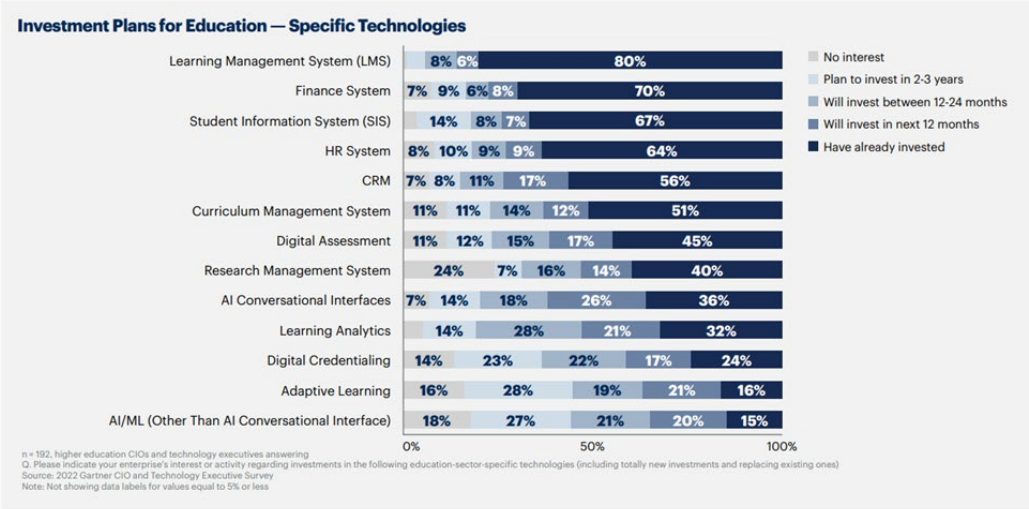
- *What we're trying to execute against this year is shorter and in spread over time.*

Technology Investments

The element likely to see the most evolution as time progresses is technology. The total spending on learning technologies is estimated to reach about $7.4 billion in 2022. (Gallo, 2022) The user interface on many programs, while manageable, still results in hiccups during hybrid learning delivery. Ease of use will be so helpful to those new to the field, especially if it mimics programs well-known. Bookboon reports that "86% of L&D decision-makers believe product simplicity, ease-of-use & usability are critical to the success of a digital learning solution at their company." Last year, the same study cited content as top priority.

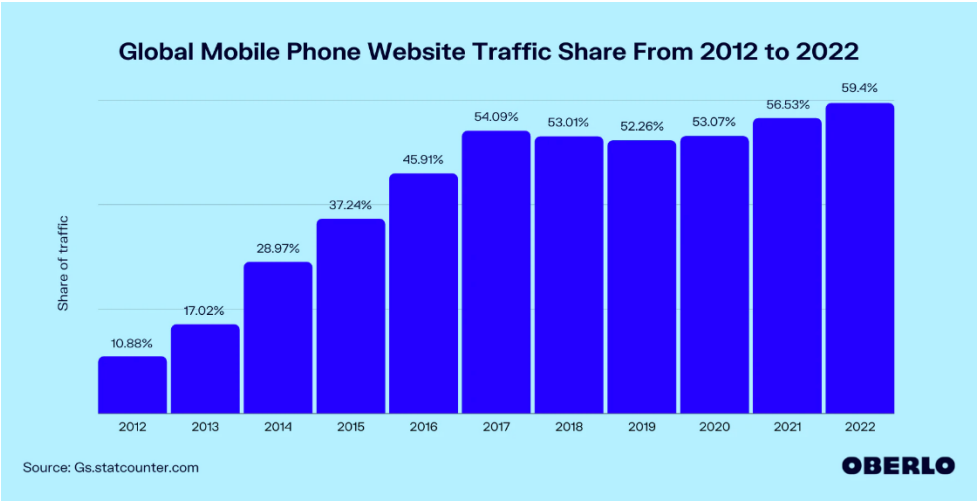
From a higher education perspective, the following investments are being made in Information Technology:

Figure 18. Technology Investment Plans for Higher Education



Mobile-First Learning

Mobile-first learning is going to be a key component in hybrid; 53.74% of the total web visits are currently mobile, compared to 46.26% coming from desktops. (Oberlo, 2022)



Keeping in mind that the future is mobile is helpful as different options are evaluated for developing websites. One interviewee happened to mention that Sharepoint is compatible with mobile devices operating on Android and iOS. The ability to have your website automatically mobile-compatible with these two popular systems is an asset and prevents future needs to transition to an alternative platform.

The need to continually update technology will not end; the question remains as to how to create a culture that leverages current resources, is nimble, and can adjust on short notice.

Augmented Reality/Virtual Reality/Mixed Reality

"The use of augmented reality/virtual reality/mixed reality (AR/VR/MR) has shot up the ranks, with nearly half of the respondents expecting to increase their usage. This is especially true among large organizations, of which 65 percent plan to increase use of AR, compared with only 34 percent the previous year. In fact, 46 percent of companies plan to adopt emerging tech into learning, training and collaboration platforms by the end of 2022. Another 14 percent have already done so."

Incorporation of new hybrid formats

With health concerns reduced, there is an increased likelihood that some of the other formats of hybrid learning mentioned at the outset of this article will be more common within the hybrid repertoire. One particular model that holds great promise is the connected classroom, which has a requisite number of students at each location to maintain community and bonding.

Learning and Development leaders also referenced shorter, in-person sessions that would enable a larger proportion of their learners to network and strengthen ties to the organization, especially if the team members were dispersed.

Reflections

Throughout the research, there were a number of themes that emerged that were not actionable per se, yet worthy of reflection.

Higher Standards for Hybrid Programs

Many interviewees noted the importance of engagement and inclusion during hybrid programs. However, as one noted, it appears that hybrid learning is being held to a higher standard then on-site programming:

> *[W]e could get in a room and have a terrible learning experience. If I'm just going to talk at you for three hours, I could do that over Zoom as well; the mode doesn't matter.*

> *When we had in person training, we know that people would just get up and leave and go to a client meeting or go take a phone call. We still have all that (in the virtual environment). I don't know why we sort of like choose to ignore it in certain circumstances.*

> *Sometimes we'd purposely bring them to another hotel, or purposely bring them (somewhere else). [We] get them out of that environment, because I don't want somebody to knock on the door, I don't want them to be watching who's walking by and, you know, being able to make it too easy for them to, to walk out of the room and get on an email or get on phone or whatever. The advantage of the off-site is to get them out of their environment, and truly get them to focus.*

Without consistency in pedagogical training and technology know-how, (not to mention the quick pivot to online learning and the challenges inherent therein) perhaps it is premature to assess the hybrid classroom.

Need for Further Preparation

As mentioned earlier, hybrid learning is the current back-up plan for organizations in case of a new quarantine or alternative scenario. During the recent pandemic, although there were resources in place for technology training and instructional design assistance, access to and interest in these were spotty. Furthermore, compliance with organizational processes (in the case of academia) was inconsistent. If hybrid learning is the go-to strategy in an emergency, one wonders how organizations are assessing current skillsets in the domain, especially as many faculty members have returned to campus. One trend noted in the interviews was to have new faculty members on-boarded with the requisite training. In this way, culture can begin to change to a greater extent.

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As we have seen corporations embrace the idea of lifelong learning, our own strategies for continually improving our skillsets in pedagogy will enable sustained competitive advantage for institutions of higher education. Building communities in the classroom will be inordinately helpful to gaining ground in a hyper-competitive market.

Embedded Learning

In its current state, embedded learning is generally used to describe content that can be applied immediately. Virtual cohorts are generally designed to have shorter sessions, to avoid "Zoom fatigue." Another example that has been referenced is having on-site participants leave programs with strategic plans ready for execution.

The opportunities for integration are endless. As of now, non-program participants are not engaged, thus reducing the chance that learning will be sustained upon arrival at the office. Nor are program alumni from the same company generally engaged again. These are just two of many opportunities to be leveraged to embed learning more holistically. As time evolves, these alternatives are likely to be suggested by the creative minds of designers.

Keeping Up with Technology

Interviewees noted that at the beginning of the pandemic, there was "grace" given for adjustments and difficulties with online pedagogy and technology. As time has passed, however, higher standards are being observed. This is attributable to numerous factors. The prevalence of online providers with top-notch technology puts the onus on academic institutions to provide an equal experience.

The institutions interviewed all had some online pedagogy and technology training available; access to and/or interest in this by faculty and staff varied. In instances where enthusiasm really appeared to take off, a community of learners had been established – from co-teaching, peer learning, and pilot testing committees to mentoring, pairing new and seasoned faculty, and other formats. In another example, a faculty member from Peru noted that there was a professional association in which faculty could share frustrations and tips for managing in the hybrid environment, which helped both validate and normalize experiences.

From these examples, we see that the sharing and implementation best practices result in the building and bonding of the classroom community, recognition of learner experience, the fostering of joy and intrinsic motivation, and learning retention. It should be clearly noted that

these goals are not unique to online learning. On the other hand, the disengagement potential is naturally higher amongst those participating virtually, thereby making these elements especially critical. To optimize the experience for all involved, established protocol for training in technology and online pedagogy is critical. Compliance will result in a more even delivery across faculty, and the result will be a stronger, more engaging experience for the learner.

Obviously, there are faculty that will remain uncomfortable with their online "performance," and there are alternatives that can be explored to mitigate this while maintaining their inclusion in executive education programs. From finding new ways to integrate their efforts (i.e., coaching in smaller groups, establishing pre-recorded videos for programs to include, to creating opportunities for them to connect with potential clients, the options are there, ready for the picking.

Data Mining

Data and analytics have become a driving factor towards excellence in industry, and executive education divisions with the capacity to deliver measurable results. The usage of data mining techniques has can provide added advantage. Even better, the ability to seamlessly integrate learner achievements into corporate databases will serve higher education institutions well in terms of perceived customer service.

On the topic of metrics, if measurements such as learner attributes, geographies, and corporate employers have not yet begun with respect to hybrid learning, the time is ripe to do so. With information abounding on the current interest in hybrid learning "post-pandemic," understanding the institution's naturally inclined audience can be very meaningful. Examining trends across programs from a quantitative perspective, when combined within global, national, and institutional context, provide the Executive Education division with a clearer idea of strengths and suggest industries, topics, and learner populations ripe for further exploration.

Customers/Clients Self-Customizing Experiences

Learning and Development divisions within organizations are being held to a higher standard for a multitude of reasons. As mentioned, both their influence and budgets are expanding, and with it comes accountability. All in all, clients and participants have a multitude of options at their fingertips, and want to be sure that both their time and effort is well-spent.

Internal learning divisions establish personal learning journeys by assessing the life bandwidth of the learner, providing interventions in a number of ways, and empowering learning. Several organizations consulted in this article clarified that customer service nowadays is tantamount, and lack thereof triggers the decision to explore other options. Creativity is key.

Sensing Silos

Multiple interviewees have observed the existence of silos within their organizations, where divisional goals are at odds with one another. Naturally, these challenges are augmented with a workforce dispersed across the globe. One of the great elements of hybrid learning is that it has the capacity to engage everyone in common learning, and is geography-agnostic. The ability to help organizations break down silos and help with alignment through hybrid learning can be a very value-added effort.

Leveraging Alternative Resources

UNICON member organizations are housed within a larger community de facto. The interviews revealed that resources available to the for-credit side of institutions were often much more technologically advanced than their own. That being said, the likelihood that they are being utilized full-time is small, and in a global business environment, opportunities to leverage the space during off-hours may be a strategy for cost recovery.

There are also multiple divisions on a University Campus with expertise in building community and connection. From Student Affairs to Residence Life and beyond, strategies regularly employed by these divisions can explored and implemented in the Executive Education classroom. Similarly, the Alumni Affairs division of an institution is likely to be a source of inspiration in engaging those from past programs.

Suggestions for Further Research

This article has showcased a wide variety of topics regarding best practices in hybrid learning. Opinions from universities and corporations have been considered. What remains, however, is

the attributes of the hybrid learner in Executive Education. What are the trends, commonalities, key influences in program selection, and considerations?

Other topics for important research are the new technologies coming out, which are piquing the interest of Senior Learning and Development executives. From Metaverse to Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality, to gamification and more, the wide array of new technologies is sparking both curiosity and investment. The time is ripe to explore where the possibilities exist for merging learning and technology in the academic context.

Conclusion

The transition to hybrid learning was accomplished with a great sense of urgency, but as time has gone on its future in the Executive Education portfolio – both within higher education and industry—seems promising. As evident in Appendix A, our survey revealed that our respondents expect to maintain 58% of their portfolio in the hybrid space, which is remarkable given the lack of preparedness many have experienced in the past few years.

With that said, there are still several issues that must be addressed before the modality overshadows in-person learning. Connectivity issues, ease with user interface, and additional successes with online pedagogy will all help expedite a more solid foundation for the format. For now, focus on the customer experience, learner engagement across audiences, and a sense of community can be honed, to create a larger learning community globally.

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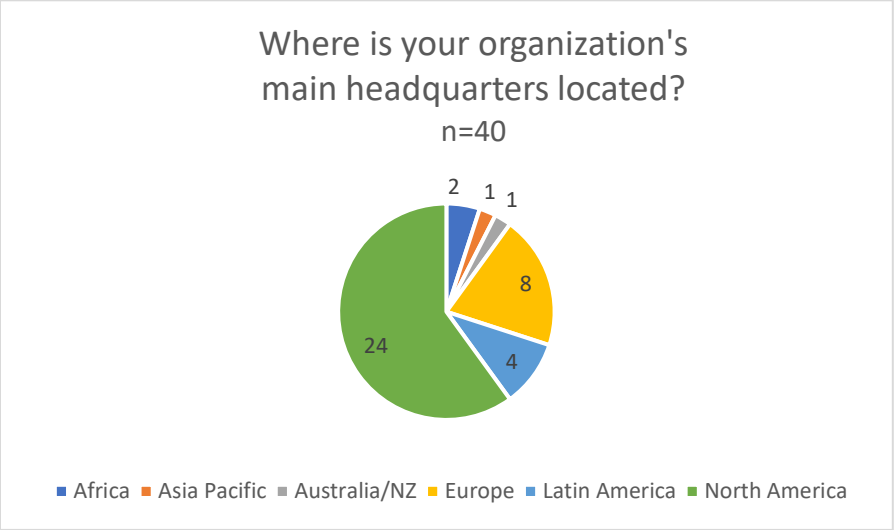
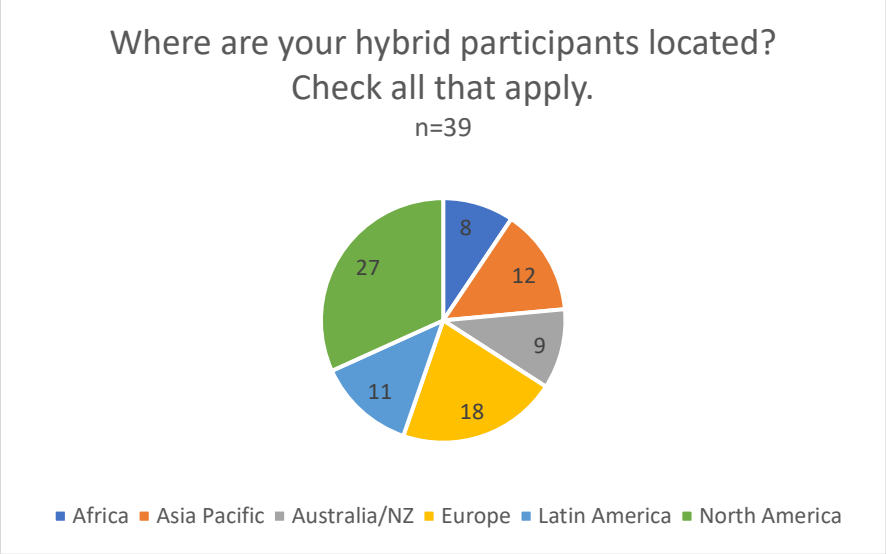
APPENDIX A: SURVEY RESULTS





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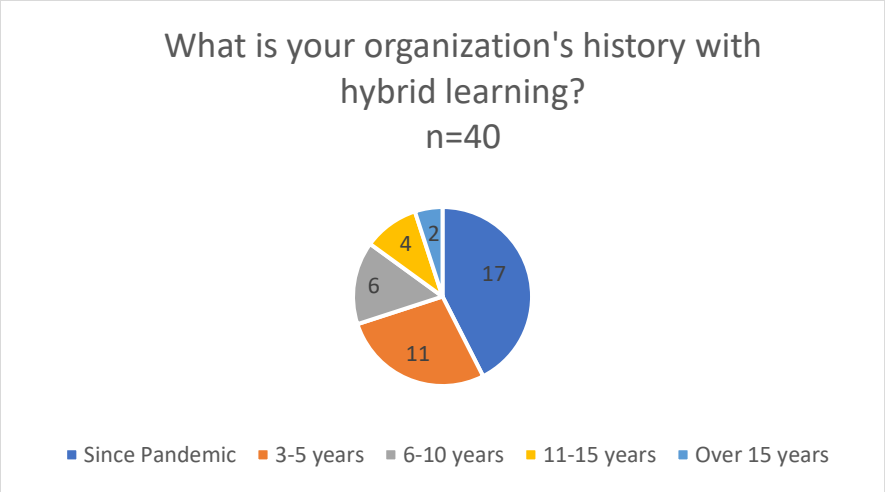
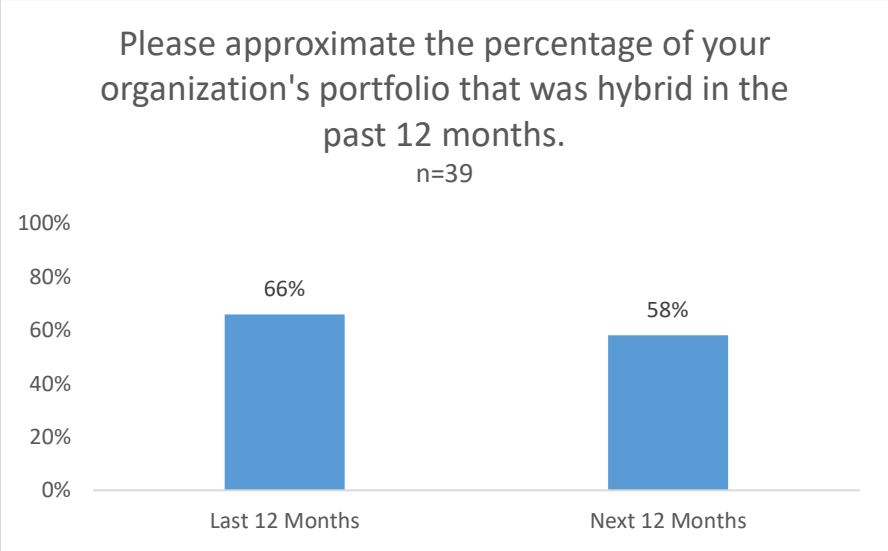
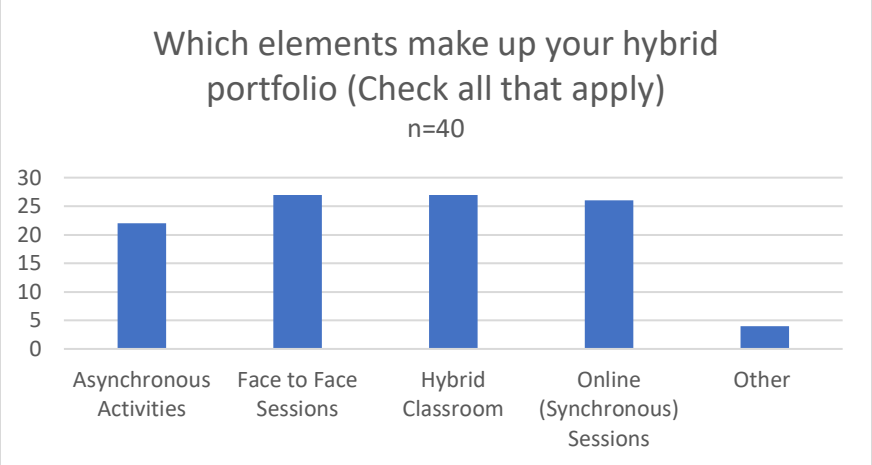

What is your organization's history with hybrid learning?
n=40
17
11
6
4
2
Since Pandemic
3-5 years
6-10 years
11-15 years
Over 15 years


Please approximate the percentage of your organization's portfolio that was hybrid in the past 12 months.
n=39
100%
80%
60%
40%
20%
0%
66%
58%
Last 12 Months
Next 12 Months


Which elements make up your hybrid portfolio (Check all that apply)
n=40
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Asynchronous Activities
Face to Face Sessions
Hybrid Classroom
Online (Synchronous) Sessions
Other

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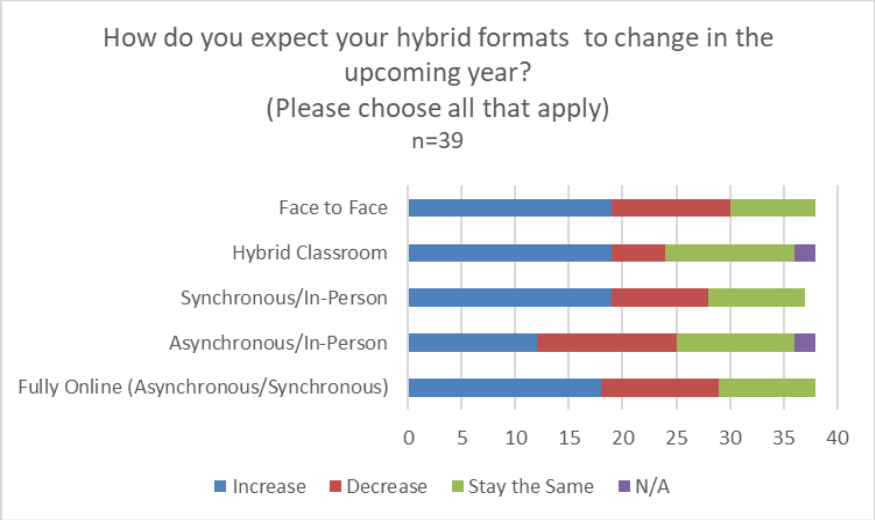
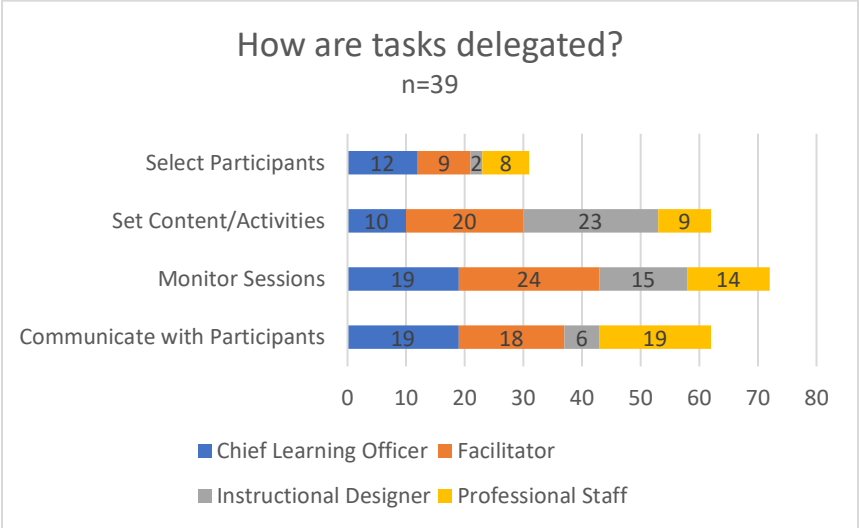
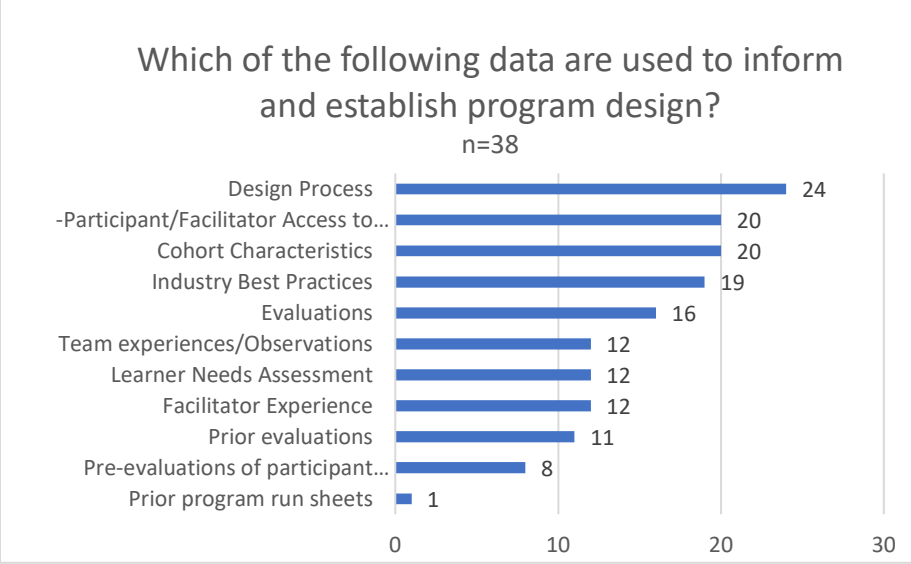

How do you expect your hybrid formats to change in the upcoming year?
(Please choose all that apply)
n=39
Face to Face
Hybrid Classroom
Synchronous/In-Person
Asynchronous/In-Person
Fully Online (Asynchronous/Synchronous)
0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40
Increase
Decrease
Stay the Same
N/A


How are tasks delegated?
n=39
Select Participants
12 9 2 8
Set Content/Activities
10 20 23 9
Monitor Sessions
19 24 15 14
Communicate with Participants
19 18 6 19
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80
Chief Learning Officer
Facilitator
Instructional Designer
Professional Staff


Which of the following data are used to inform and establish program design?
n=38
Design Process 24
-Participant/Facilitator Access to... 20
Cohort Characteristics 20
Industry Best Practices 19
Evaluations 16
Team experiences/Observations 12
Learner Needs Assessment 12
Facilitator Experience 12
Prior evaluations 11
Pre-evaluations of participant... 8
Prior program run sheets 1
0 10 20 30

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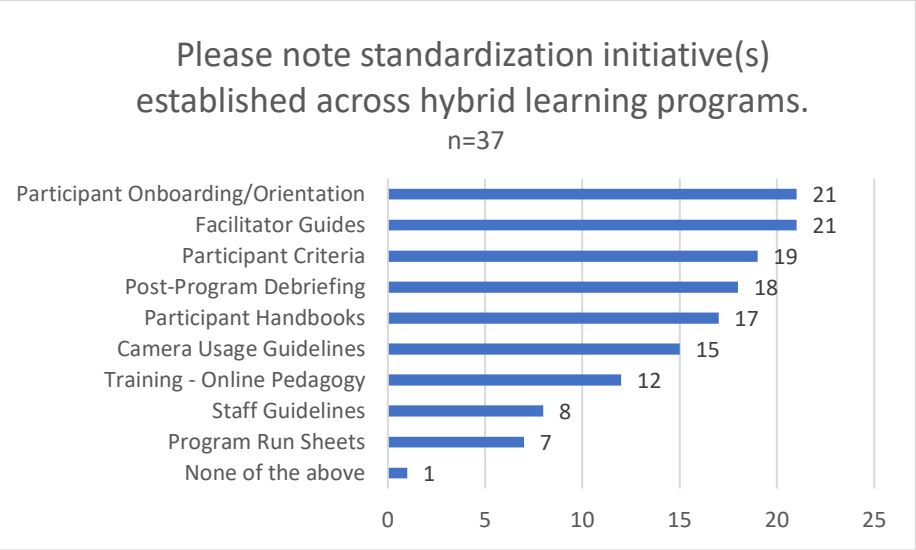
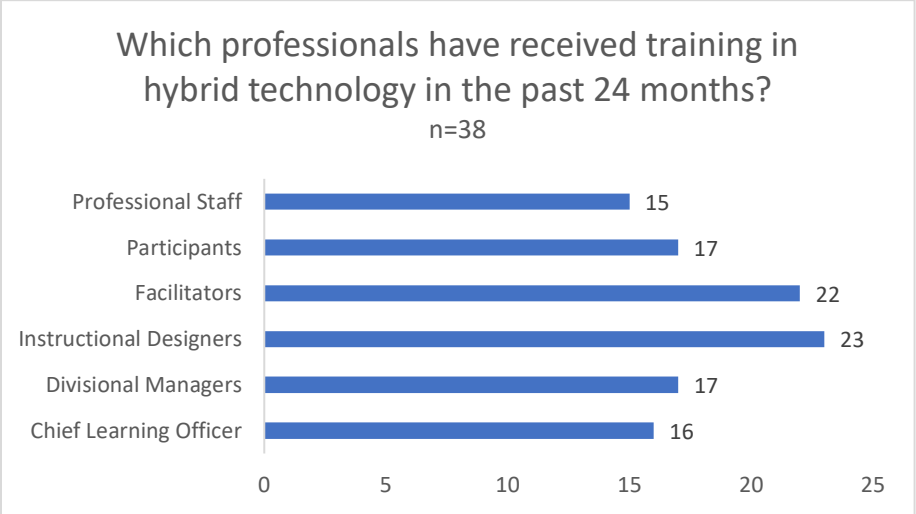
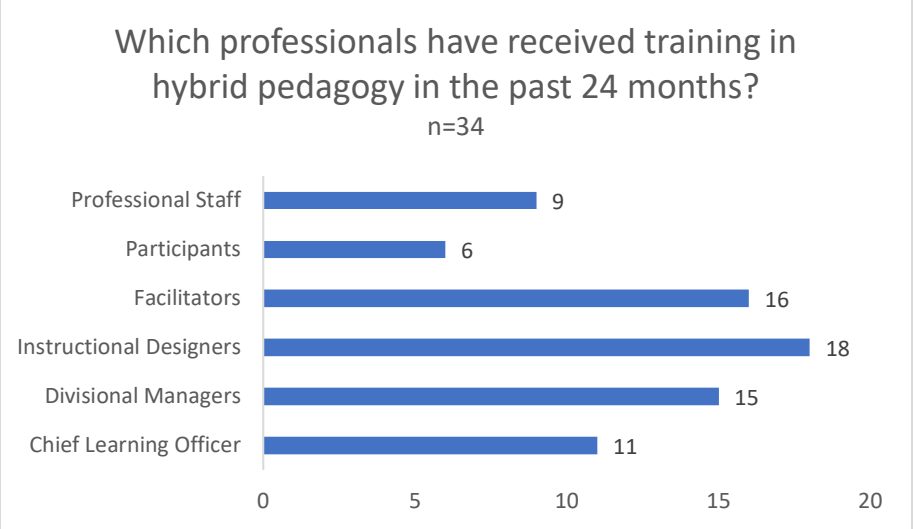

Please note standardization initiative(s) established across hybrid learning programs.
n=37
Participant Onboarding/Orientation 21
Facilitator Guides 21
Participant Criteria 19
Post-Program Debriefing 18
Participant Handbooks 17
Camera Usage Guidelines 15
Training - Online Pedagogy 12
Staff Guidelines 8
Program Run Sheets 7
None of the above 1
0 5 10 15 20 25


Which professionals have received training in hybrid technology in the past 24 months?
n=38
Professional Staff 15
Participants 17
Facilitators 22
Instructional Designers 23
Divisional Managers 17
Chief Learning Officer 16
0 5 10 15 20 25


Which professionals have received training in hybrid pedagogy in the past 24 months?
n=34
Professional Staff 9
Participants 6
Facilitators 16
Instructional Designers 18
Divisional Managers 15
Chief Learning Officer 11
0 5 10 15 20

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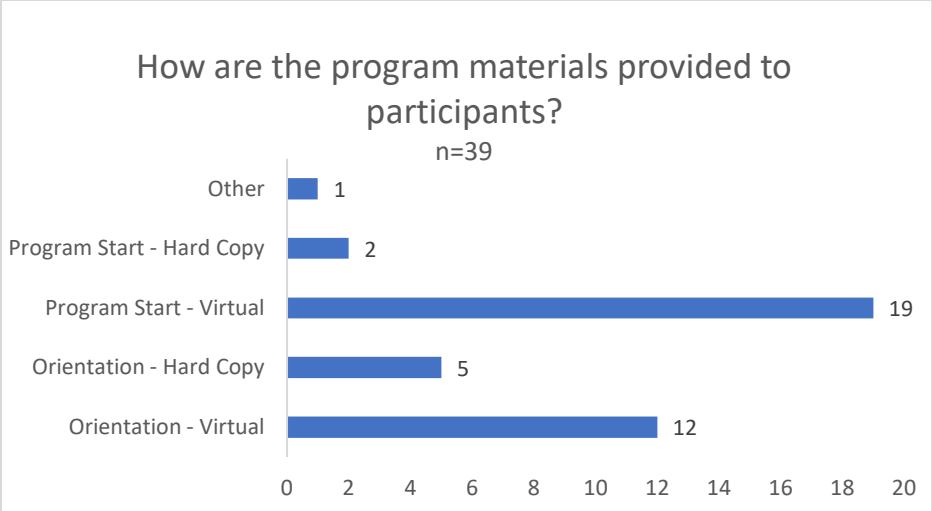
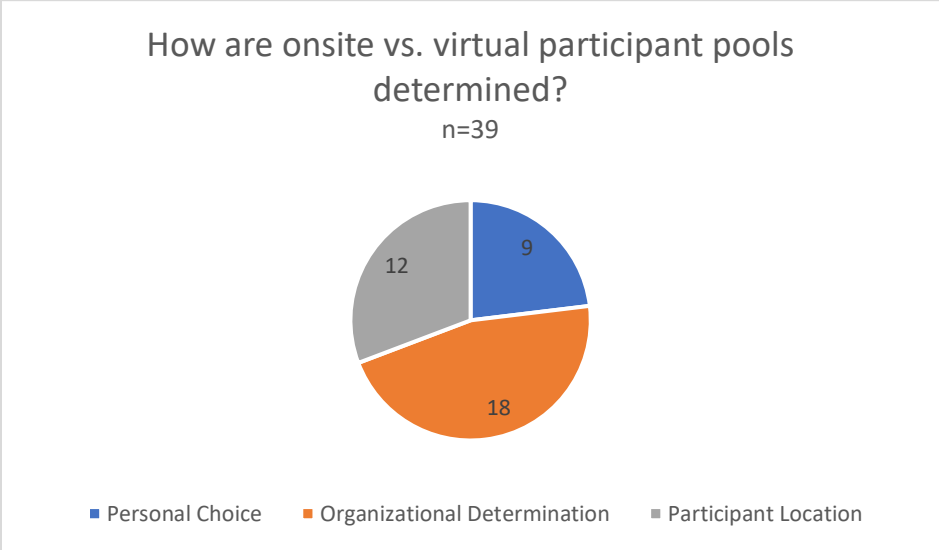
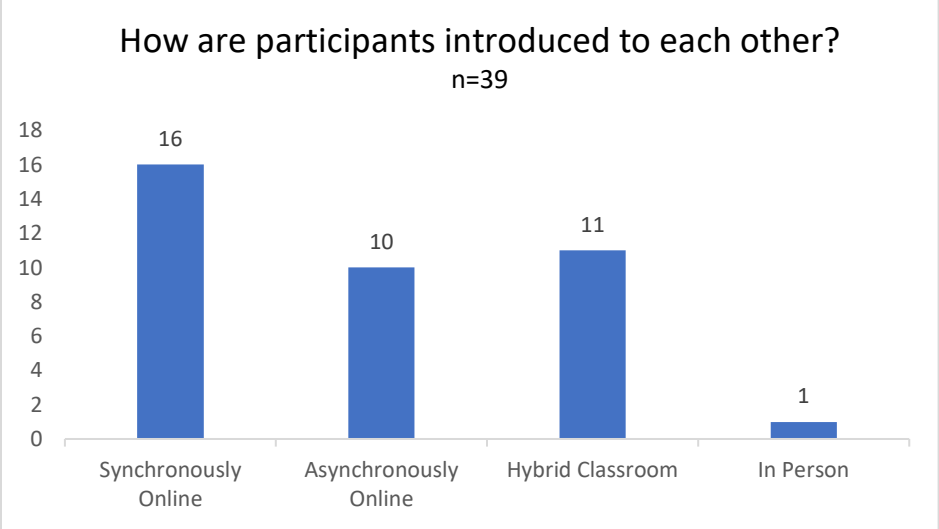

How are the program materials provided to participants?
n=39
Other
1
Program Start - Hard Copy
2
Program Start - Virtual
19
Orientation - Hard Copy
5
Orientation - Virtual
12
0 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 18 20


How are onsite vs. virtual participant pools determined?
n=39
9
18
12
Personal Choice
Organizational Determination
Participant Location


How are participants introduced to each other?
n=39
18
16
14
12
10
8
6
4
2
0
16
10
11
1
Synchronously Online
Asynchronously Online
Hybrid Classroom
In Person

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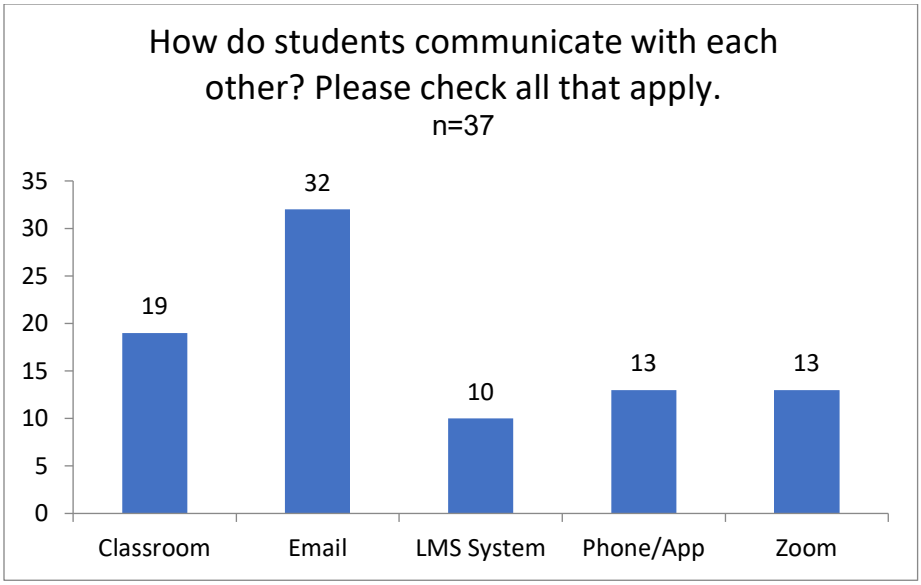
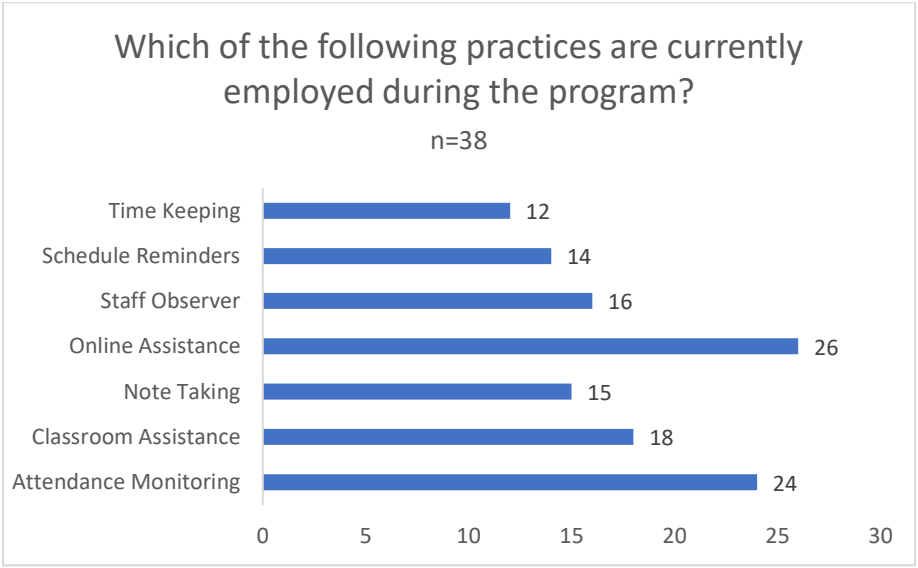

How do students communicate with each other? Please check all that apply.
n=37
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
19
32
10
13
13
Classroom
Email
LMS System
Phone/App
Zoom


Which of the following practices are currently employed during the program?
n=38
Time Keeping
Schedule Reminders
Staff Observer
Online Assistance
Note Taking
Classroom Assistance
Attendance Monitoring
12
14
16
26
15
18
24
0
5
10
15
20
25
30

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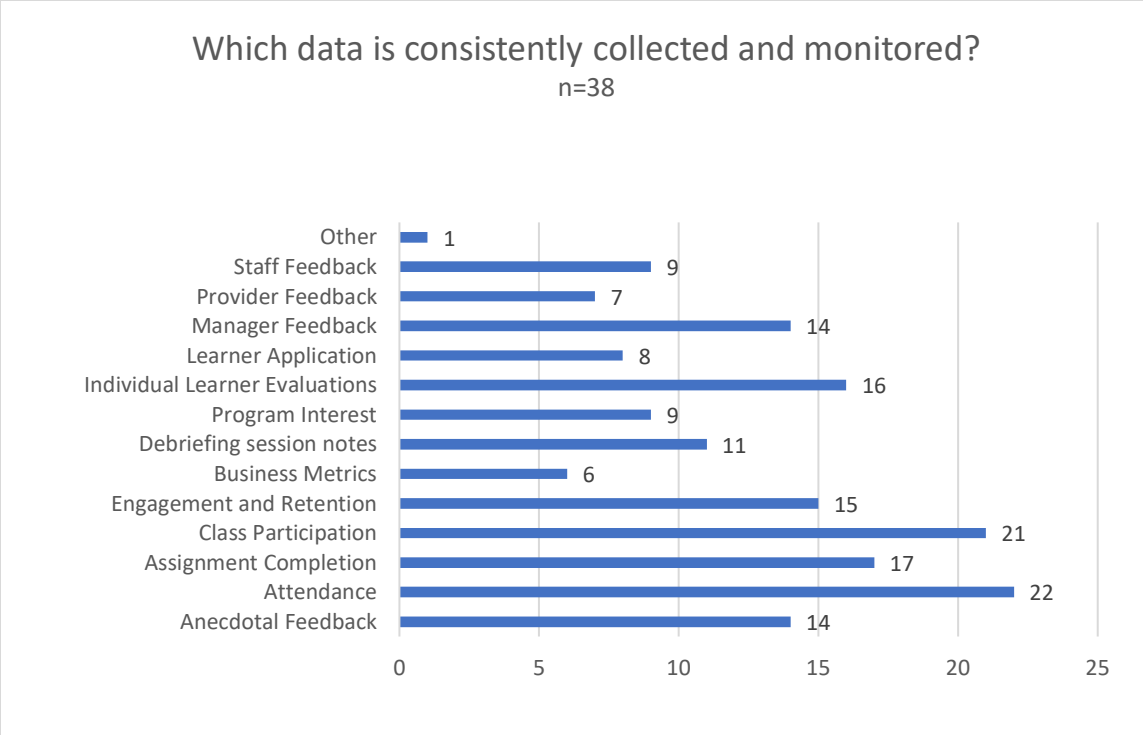
Which data is consistently collected and monitored?
n=38
Other
Staff Feedback
Provider Feedback
Manager Feedback
Learner Application
Individual Learner Evaluations
Program Interest
Debriefing session notes
Business Metrics
Engagement and Retention
Class Participation
Assignment Completion
Attendance
Anecdotal Feedback
1
9
7
14
8
16
9
11
6
15
21
17
22
14
0
5
10
15
20
25

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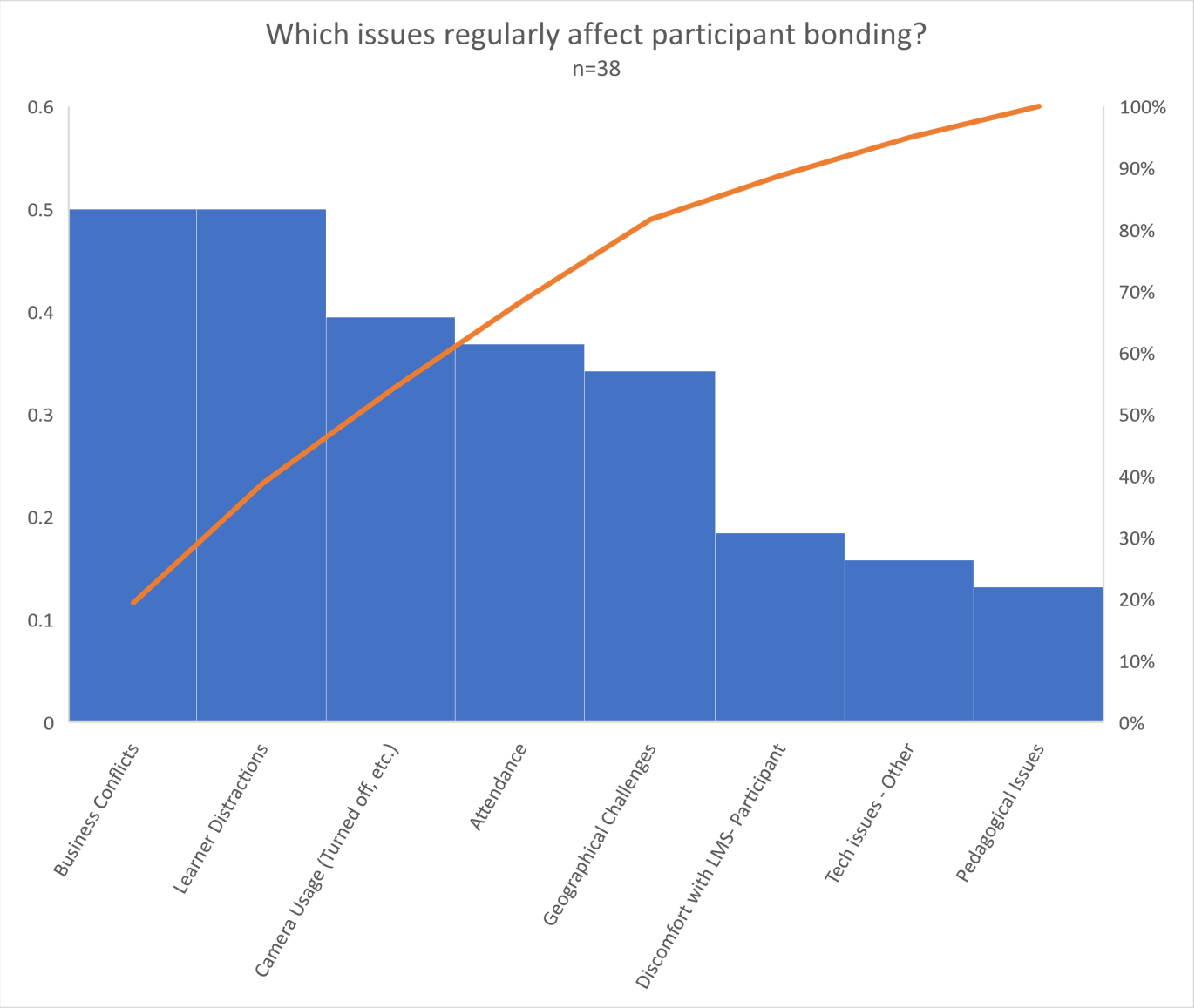
Which issues regularly affect participant bonding?
n=38
0.6
0.5
0.4
0.3
0.2
0.1
0
100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
Business Conflicts
Learner Distractions
Camera Usage (Turned off, etc.)
Attendance
Geographical Challenges
Discomfort with LMS- Participant
Tech issues - Other
Pedagogical Issues

APPENDIX B: CURRENT THOUGHTS ON IN-PERSON LEARNING

As learning is now considered to be an ongoing intervention, lifelong as opposed to one-time, in-person attendance is now set into the context of participants' learning journey. Repeatedly referenced throughout the corporate interviews was Mosher and Gottfredson's Five Moments of Need. It is suggested that the first two moments best benefit from formal learning; the others can be incorporated through learning in the flow of work or peer exchange.

- Learning for the first time (New)
- Learning More (More)
- Applying what you've learned (Apply)
- When things go wrong (Problem Solving)
- When things change (Change)

Additional motivations for in-person learning cited by corporations interviewed for this article included the following:

- Learning should include in-person components when vulnerability is a core element of learning. (i.e., when a participant is likely to have questions that need input from peers or the instructor)
- Learning should include in-person components when the ability to quickly see a participant's computer screen has high value.
- In-person components are necessary for when trying to engage and retain talent.[2]
- In-person learning is helpful when individuals have been promoted to certain levels.
- In-person learning is helpful when the material to be presented cannot be adequately disseminated in half-day sessions online.
- In-person programs are helpful when learners need to meet, interact, and have facetime with senior-level organizational leaders.
- In-person programs inspire a sense of belonging.
- In-person for leadership skills, consulting skills, less black and white.
- In-person learning when you want leaders to focus and don't want them to be disturbed.

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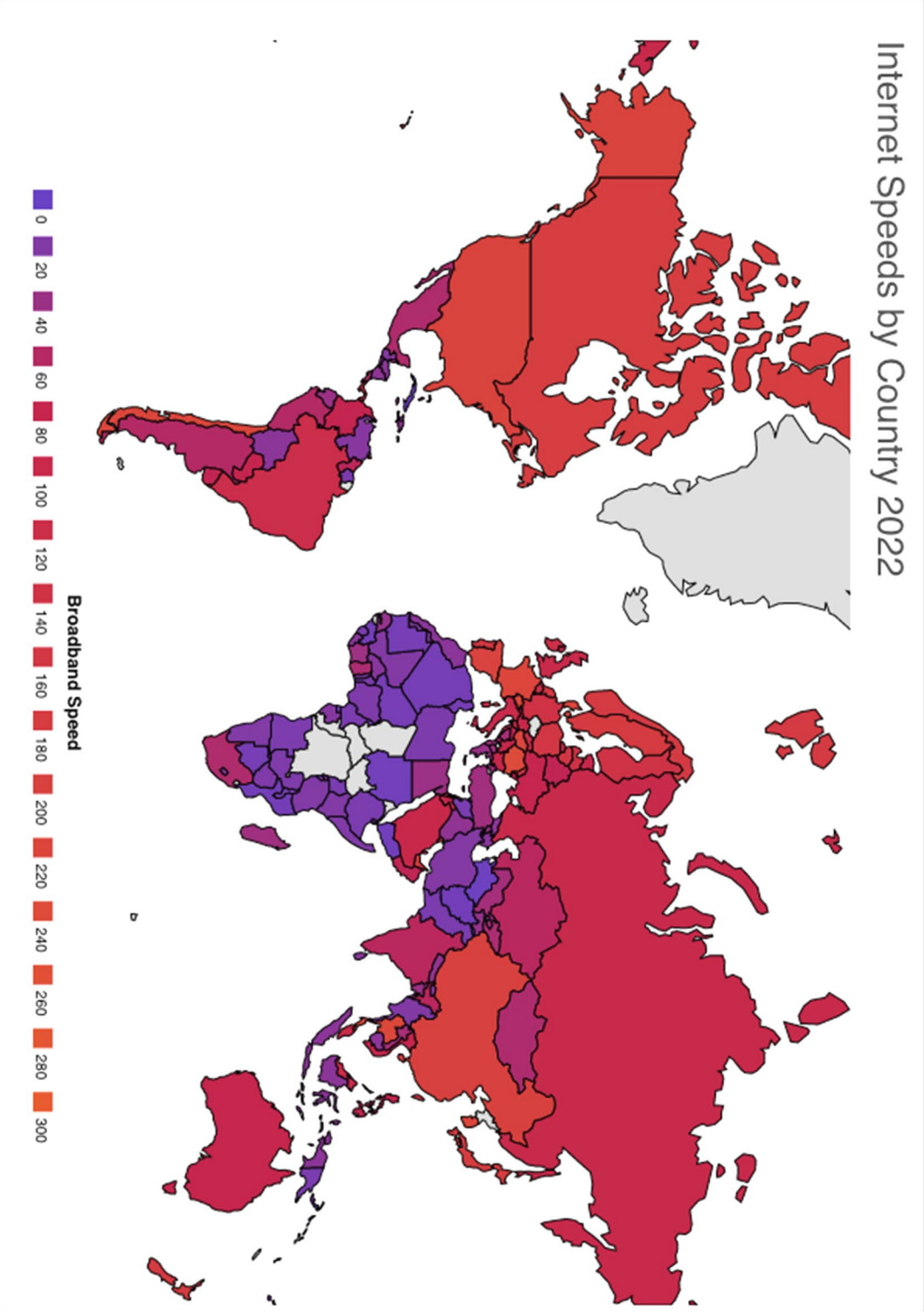
APPENDIX C: INTERNET SPEEDS BY COUNTRY



[3]

[3] (Atlas & Boots)

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APPENDIX D: CORPORATE TRAINING LANDSCAPE

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