

Digital as a Catalyst: Now is the time for business schools to transform

Business schools must continue to develop their digital ecosystems, to help prepare learners for a fast-changing and digitally-charged business environment, say **Mike Cooray** and **Rikke Duus**



Over the last two years, the global pandemic has taught us that all businesses must evolve rapidly to meet new consumer and citizen demands. It is evident that those organisations that had already embraced digital technologies were able to race ahead, while others scrambled to find new digital business models to ensure their survival.

Similarly, many business schools around the world made significant strides to meet the needs of their digital learners. The creation of virtual campuses, as seen at Neoma Business School, and fully equipped digital suites adopted by IMD, are examples of how some business schools have taken the opportunity to experiment with digital delivery and engagement platforms to create immersive and flexible programmes that can reach global audiences. However, not all business schools have taken the opportunity to enhance their digital capabilities or identify new methods for using digital technologies to transform their educational offers and degree structures.

It is critical that business schools continue to evolve as providers of knowledge, skills, and experiences to help prepare learners for what is now a fast-changing and digital business environment. Organisations now expect their employees to have acquired a range of digital competences which will enable them to collaborate, communicate, network, solve problems, analyse data, ideate in teams, and create outputs using digital platforms. It will no longer be sufficient to possess basic IT skills in this new world of work. As such, business schools must embrace this reality and advance their digital transformation.

As for any other organisation, it is a significant undertaking for business schools to digitally transform systems, processes, and programme portfolios alongside digital upskilling of faculty and staff. We have identified three commonly known challenges that act as barriers for business schools' digital transformation:

1. Lack of digital competences amongst faculty to re-design modules, programmes, educational content, and delivery modes using digital technologies and platforms.
2. Restricted investment in digital technologies over the years to provide learners with the required digital and hybrid modes of learning and engagement.
3. Rigid internal structures that prevent swift and appropriate changes at programme and department levels to benefit from the opportunities that digital technologies present.

In this article, we present the four-stage 'Digital Learner Experiences' (DLE) framework that can assist business schools to accelerate their digital transformation in the new age of heightened learner connectivity, and given the desire for more flexible and business-relevant learning experiences. We provide perspectives and examples of how this can be achieved through the effective and entrepreneurial use of digital platforms and also share our viewpoint on the potential evolution of the business school. The article draws on our experiences of designing and delivering digital programmes and courses during the last 10+ years at universities and business schools in the UK,

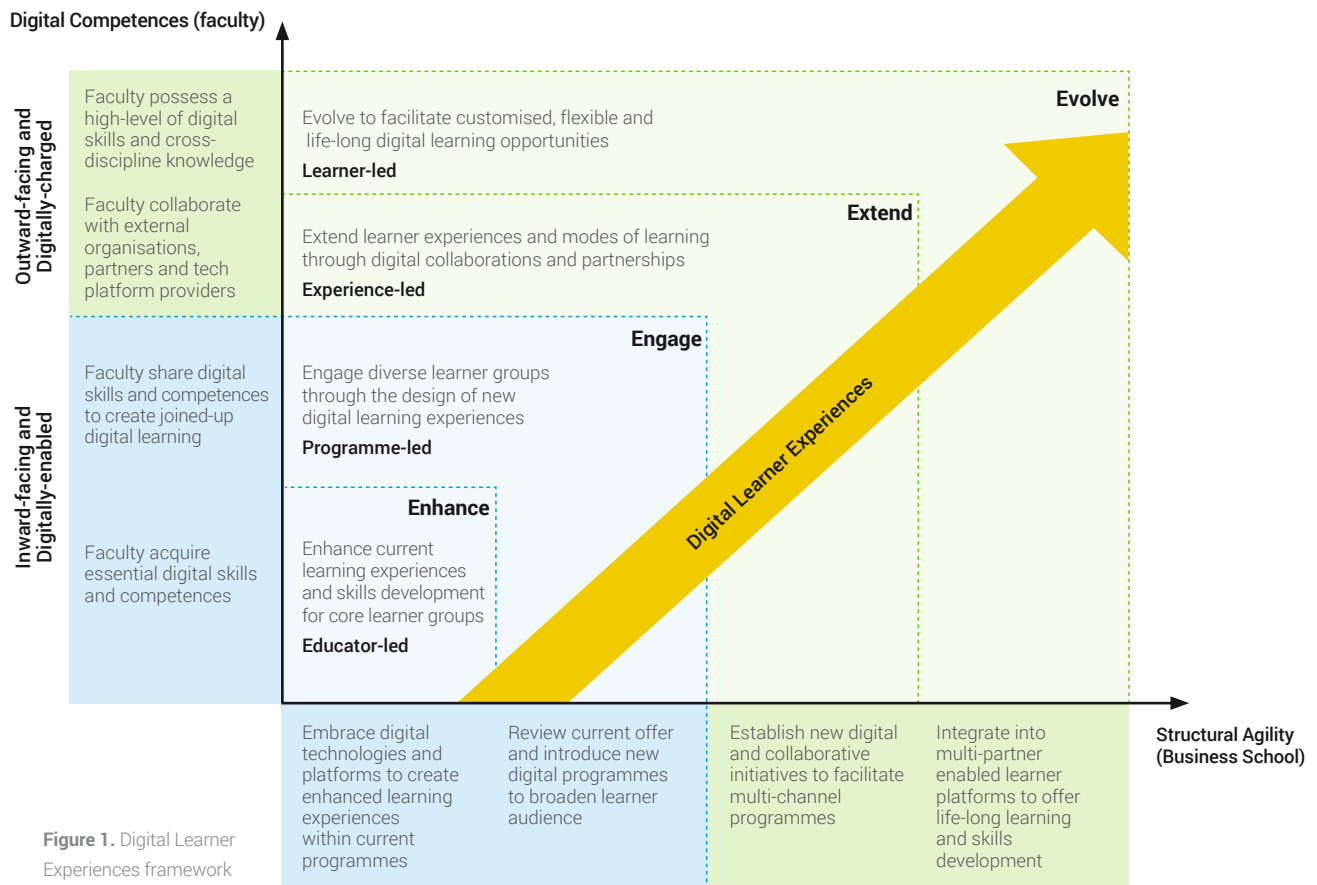


Figure 1. Digital Learner Experiences framework

Denmark, and Switzerland. In the last two years, we have intensified our design and delivery of digital learning engagements across undergraduate, postgraduate, MBA, and executive programmes. We have experimented with digital technologies and platforms to deliver impactful DigitalHacks, asynchronous educational video content, and high-intensity collaborative live online sessions. Long before the global pandemic, we also designed and delivered inter-cultural learning programmes with students and businesses in India, Germany, Canada, Denmark, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, the UK and the US, which were enabled by digital communication and collaboration platforms.

The DLE framework (see figure 1) contains four stages, with 'Enhance' as the first stage, and 'Evolve' as the last. The four stages follow progressive logic whereby transformation and adaptation increase for each stage. The first two stages, 'Enhance' and 'Engage', focus on the creation of digital learning initiatives and programmes that business schools can develop in-house to ensure their educational offers are aligned to current and future learner and

employer demands. The subsequent stages, 'Extend' and 'Evolve', can be attained through collaborations and partnerships with other business schools, external organisations, and digital platform providers to create business immersions and life-long learning programmes. We encourage business school managers and faculty to ensure high performance at one stage before moving on to the next. At each stage, it is necessary for faculty to acquire *digital competences* and for the business school to embrace *structural agility*. These two dimensions are essential pillars if business schools are to proactively transform and create new dynamic digital learner experiences.

Enhance

The primary objective at the 'Enhance' stage is to enhance current learning experiences and skills development for the core group of learners with whom the business school engages. While some business schools have introduced a gradual return to on-campus teaching, many are continuing to teach online through a combination of hybrid and asynchronous





We have embraced this opportunity to further develop our educational practices and approaches for a digital learning environment. On the modules we design across subjects such as digital strategy and transformation, digital customer engagement, dynamic organisations, and urban transformation, we purposely make use of multiple digital platforms and software. We do this in order to achieve a heightened level of engagement with students and also to help students acquire digital skills in practice, which are transferrable to the workplace. We use collaborative digital platforms such as Mural, Lucidspark, and Miro, digital content creation platforms such as Genially, Canva, ThingLink and Loom, and data analytics solutions such as Tableau and Infogram. When we use these platforms with learners, they are able to work in a structured and collaborative manner while creating outputs that are of a professional standard. In our experience, the quality of the outputs is typically of a higher standard than when learners undertake them in analogue formats. These outputs can be easily shared with existing or potential employers to evidence their subject knowledge and the digital skills that have been acquired. We have also pioneered the creation of 'Digital Peer-Learning Hubs', which are web-based platforms that we create, host, and manage and to which we upload and exhibit student teams' digital outputs to be shared across cohorts. This facilitates peer-feedback and peer-learning and creates a competitive learning environment.

We also acquired video recording, editing and production skills to develop impactful asynchronous video content in a documentary style that blends our own presentation of subject knowledge and academic frameworks with real-world business examples, the latest media coverage, CEO interviews, reflection questions and activities to proactively engage the students.



delivery styles. Digital education in business schools is here to stay and therefore it is critical that business schools now seek to further enhance their digital education offers. For those business schools that have struggled to identify and act on new opportunities made possible by the wide access to digital learning platforms and tools, they must now focus on providing the structural agility to swiftly adapt programmes, modules, and assessments while enhancing their faculty's digital skills and competences. These digital competences need to extend beyond familiarity with the business school's learning management system.

The focus is on enhancing current programmes and educational offers to ensure optimal engagement with learners and that relevant digital skills development is incorporated into programmes and modules. To facilitate this, the business school needs to embrace digital experimentation and create opportunities and support systems for faculty to become digitally-enabled by acquiring new digital competences and exploring new modes of learner interaction.

Engage

At the 'Engage' stage of the DLE framework, the focus is on engaging diverse learner groups through the design of new digital learning experiences. Here it becomes possible for business schools to reach new learner segments, beyond the core student groups, with digital programmes and learning experiences if faculty have acquired and shared digital competences and adopted a joined-up approach to digital learning. This process needs to be supported by structural agility to review current educational offers and introduce new educator-led digital programmes that broaden and reach international learner audiences, part-time students and executive learners, for example on Degree Apprenticeship programmes in the UK.

There are significant barriers to innovation in higher education. For example, the prolonged time it takes to get a new educational offer to market and the often risk-averse and conservative mindset that influences management and other decision-makers' willingness to challenge the status quo.

Business schools would benefit from adopting a more entrepreneurial mindset and disrupting conventional practices and beliefs about what a business school should be. While business schools have enjoyed their privileged position of having degree awarding powers, learners now have access to an array of non-traditional education and training providers including consultancies (e.g., PwC Academy), private education providers (e.g., Pearson and BPP), and digital disruptors (e.g., LinkedIn Learning, Google Digital Academy, Udemy and Udacity).

Business schools should consolidate the learning from the rapid transition to digital education and extract best practice examples to be shared across faculty to inspire colleagues to become digitally-enabled. With a joined-up approach, new digital learning experiences can be designed and further accelerate innovation. In the UCL School of Management, a dedicated team of technology experts and faculty was





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assembled to guide faculty through the transition to online teaching. Teaching and Learning Conferences were also held supplemented by online communities where staff could share good practice and learnings from their own transitions to becoming digital educators. Encouraging faculty to acquire a more pronounced digital mindset and a greater level of interest in digital education has contributed positively to the expansion of modules and faculty engagement on the UCL Online MBA, one of the school's newest programmes. At Hult International Business School (Ashridge), the acquisition of new digital skills and familiarity with digital platforms led to an expansion of the Custom, Open and Degree Apprenticeship programme portfolio. A series of new online Open Programmes and an on-demand learning platform, Leadership Live, have been designed to drive high levels of engagement with executive audiences who prefer to fit their learning more flexibly around their work commitments. This shift to an online delivery mode and development of new

programme designs brings new innovation and helps the organisation to engage with diverse learner groups.

The first two stages of the DLE framework, 'Enhance' and 'Engage', focus on how business schools need to become digitally-enabled from within by enhancing digital skills and competences, facilitating joined-up digital learning across the school, and enabling a greater level of structural agility to drive digital innovation across programmes and new programme development. The outcomes of these activities are enhanced learner experiences and engagement with new learner groups, achieved through relevant and competitive digital education offers. However, we firmly believe that business schools must move beyond the 'Enhance' and 'Engage' stages to meet the needs of new learner profiles who seek more flexible, practice-based and business-relevant education that stretches beyond the typical 3- or 4-year degree programmes. We therefore propose a digitally-charged transformation for business schools that is more outward-facing and externally driven.

Here we believe that business schools must 'Extend' and 'Evolve'.

Extend

At the 'Extend' stage of the DLE framework, the focus is on extending the learner experience and modes of learning through digital collaborations and partnerships. This is critical for business schools that need to bring the outside world into the digital classroom and connect students with current issues and debates, and offers organisations and business leaders the opportunity to positively contribute. In the traditional face-to-face classroom, time zones, geographical distance and availability often make it challenging to get input and engagement from business leaders and industry practitioners. However, when those boundaries are removed, it creates almost unlimited opportunities for faculty and business schools to innovate and extend their teaching and module design into business and other real-world spheres.

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In a digitally-charged business school, faculty are encouraged to collaborate with external organisations, partners and tech platform providers to create practice-based digital learning experiences that bring together multiple contributors nationally and internationally. In China, GSK Consumer Healthcare China (GSK CH) and Taobao University Asia-Pacific Institute jointly developed and provide customised digital learning programmes for GSK CH employees across the Asia Pacific region.

With the support of the business school to create new digital collaborative initiatives, faculty can partner with external organisations to design business-led challenges with students and alumni entering from across the university, or as an international and inter-university set-up. It is also possible to create and inject live cases with members of the case organisation joining students live online and through asynchronous video material. We have designed international digital live case experiences with organisations such as Mlesna (Sri Lankan tea manufacturer and exporter), Leapcraft (Danish provider of clean air solutions) and Copenhagen Solutions Lab (Danish innovation hub for smart city transformation) allowing students to interact with industry experts residing in different parts of the world, work on set challenges, pitch their ideas and gain feedback. This has been highly effective through the use of digital platforms and has connected students first-hand with



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businesses and societal challenges. We have developed the 'DigitalHack' methodology, specifically for the online learning environment, to enhance and extend digital learner experiences. Faculty can use this methodology to design and deliver team-based experiential learning exercises in collaboration with external organisations and partners, focusing on complex challenges such as reducing food waste, enhancing quality of life in cities, and driving innovation in the post- pandemic era. Business and industry experts can join live from anywhere in the world to share insight and expertise and act as team mentors. Faculty must therefore build their international network with business practitioners and other experts. The DigitalHack is delivered fully online, overcoming many of the typical on-site limitations.

We use Zoom as the delivery channel and incorporate access to Mural, Miro, Genially, Canva, Loom, and Tableau that teams use to create digital outputs for the Acceleration Tasks. The DigitalHack is centralised through a custom-built website with live updates which drives digital engagement and competitiveness amongst teams and accelerated digital skills development. Importantly, using the DigitalHack, we are able to work across time zones and international boundaries. Over the last three years, we have engaged part-time executive learners at ETH Zurich using the DigitalHack as a central learning and teaching methodology, bringing in external partners from Copenhagen Solutions Lab (Denmark), MoloFinance (UK) and Arup (Australia). We also see forward-thinking universities and business schools partnering with external organisations (e.g., Cisco x UCL Global Centre of Excellence), start-ups, innovation hubs, and research labs to ensure faculty are part of cutting-edge research and innovation, which also benefit students through knowledge dissemination.

Evolve

While many business schools have been forced into evolution during the last two years, it is now time to engage in proactive evolution where business school managers and faculty take the driving seat to create purposeful digital value for the school, learners, and wider ecosystem partners. The primary objective at the 'Evolve' stage is to create and facilitate customised, flexible, learner-led and life-long digital learning opportunities.

At this stage, faculty have become digital pioneers and explorers, highly experienced in using multiple digital platforms to reach, engage and connect (with) learners. Faculty have gained the ability to create impactful and interdisciplinary educational experiences that draw on insight from across subject areas in line with the complexity of business and societal challenges. To support faculty at the 'Evolution' stage and progress the school's transformation, business school leaders should enable integration into multi-partner learner-led platforms that offer personalised and life-long learning and skills development.

As access to knowledge has become democratised through digital platforms, it is essential that business schools supercharge themselves, not only by embracing digital technology to 'Enhance', 'Engage' and 'Extend', but also 'Evolve' through digitally-integrated partnerships that will provide the agility and responsiveness required to adapt to specific learner needs and requirements.

We envision business schools as ecosystem orchestrators, intensifying their integration with other business schools and universities, external organisations, employers, accreditation and professional bodies, research institutes, government departments, innovation labs and think tanks through digital platforms to provide truly personalised educational experiences, business exposure, research engagements along with placements and international collaborations. Currently, students obtain their degree from one primary academic institution, while they may choose to study some modules with a partner university and undertake placements during the summer term.

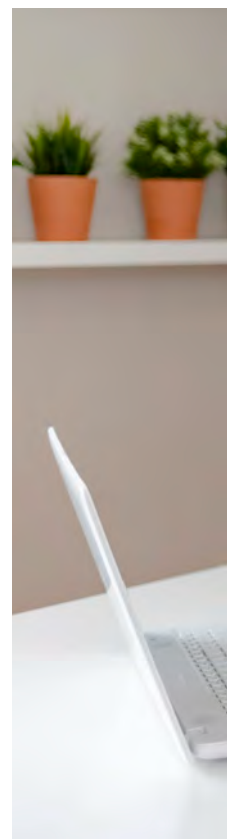
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Entrepreneurial students may also initiate part-time employment and membership of student societies as part of their extracurricular activities. To a great extent though, business schools offer a linear learner journey, focused on 'herding' students through a standardised programme design with limited flexibility for integrating diverse experiences with other members of the wider ecosystem.

In the digital ecosystem scenario, learners will be granted the flexibility to assemble a portfolio of modules from participating academic institutions across the world, set their individual learner mode (online/on-campus) and speed of progress, as well as opt for work placements, voluntary projects, international student competitions and team projects, and mentorship programmes with mentors, all undertaken and evidenced through digital



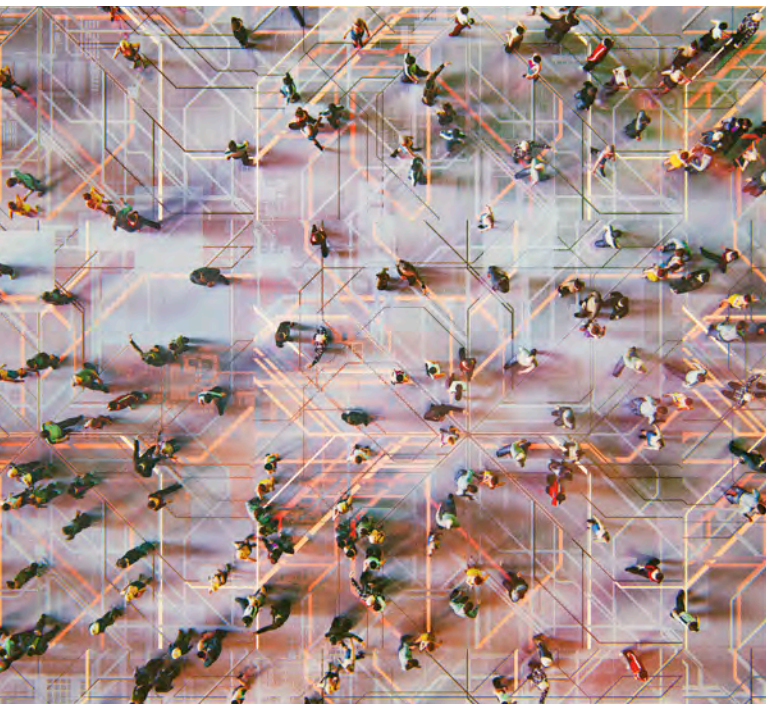


platforms. Each learner will have the flexibility to decide when to engage with which activity based on the progress they are making. Academic content will not be restricted by module subjects, but will be project-based and interdisciplinary, delivered across multiple digital channels as live interactive sessions, webinars, asynchronous video content, live business cases and through the DigitalHack methodology where students can participate from anywhere in the world. Accreditation and professional bodies will be involved to ensure students attain necessary credits to be awarded their qualification. The hosts of this integrated learner experience may be a collection of collaborating business schools or an external organisation that brings onboard participating business schools and other ecosystem partners.

This flexible, learner-led, non-boundary, and modularised approach will enable learners to design a highly customised learner journey and qualification. The learning experiences will be based on students' current abilities, knowledge acquired and preferences. This level of agility will also encourage life-long learning, enabling learners to return to top up their skills and knowledge through specific modules and learning experiences as they move through their career and life stages.

We already see glimpses of this evolution with digital education platforms, such as FutureLearn, that host online courses and degrees from universities and other organisations from across the world.

We believe business schools must move away from designing programmes that require a viable cohort. By 'de-herding', and instead focusing on becoming digitally-charged ecosystem learning partners, business schools will forge a new era of highly customised, life-long and experience-based learning that is suitable to the individual learner needs.



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