

# *Gauging faculty attitudes toward online and hybrid learning*

Jim Humphries

School of Business, Grant MacEwan College, Edmonton, Alberta, Canadá

humphriesj@macewan.ca

**Resumo:** A Escola de Negócios MacEwan em Edmonton, Canadá, tem oferecido cursos online desde 1995. Sua administração se interessou em como se percebeu a aprendizagem online e híbrida. Em novembro de 2007 uma pesquisa foi remetida a 225 docentes, para aqueles em tempo integral quanto aos de tempo parcial. Do total, 79, ou 35%, responderam a pesquisa. Perguntou-se sobre as opiniões do valor e legitimidade das credenciais online; como eles avaliariam o sistema de gestão do curso; e quais as necessidades a alterar para que os cursos fossem mais efetivos. Dois grupos focais foram estabelecidos. Tanto da pesquisa quanto dos grupos focais apontou-se como necessário pelos docentes o suporte e treinamento nas melhores práticas em aprendizagem online; e a necessária consistência e adequada remuneração aos docentes.

**Palavras-chave:** legitimidade das credenciais online, efetividade da aprendizagem online, suporte e treinamento.

**Abstract:** The MacEwan School of Business in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada has been offering online courses since 1995. Administration was interested in how faculty perceived online and hybrid learning. In November of 2007, a survey was sent to 225 full time and part time faculty members. Of the 225 faculty members, 79, or 35%, responded to the survey. The survey asked respondent opinions on the value and legitimacy of online credentials; how they would rate their course management system; and what needed to be changed in order to make online or hybrid learning more effective. Two focus groups were also held. Emerging themes from both the survey and the focus groups included the need for faculty support and training in best practices in online learning; and the need for consistency and fairness in remuneration of faculty.

**Keywords:** legitimacy of online credentials, effectiveness of online or hybrid learning, support and training.

## I PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this project were:

1. To determine School of Business faculty attitudes toward, and perceptions of online and hybrid learning. This was to be done via a survey and focus groups.
2. To analyze the results of the survey and focus groups, and to make recommendations for further action and planning.

## II DEFINITIONS

Online learning, otherwise known as e-Learning, is the type of learning resulting from courses in which the students and the instruc-

tors never meet formally face-to-face. The teaching and learning process takes place through the use of online tools such as email, discussion boards, and learning management systems.

Hybrid learning is a combination of online learning and face-to-face learning. The formal meeting time is reduced, and the best of both methods can be leveraged to advantage. LENP 400 Board Governance, part of the Executive Leadership in the Non-Profit Sector program, is currently the only hybrid course offered by the MacEwan School of Business. It is offered over a four month period, and students and instructor meet two Saturdays during that time.

### III RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to determine faculty attitudes toward, and perceptions of online and hybrid learning, a survey was sent to 225 faculty members. 55 of these were full time, and 170 part time. Responses to the survey were collected and analyzed, and the results appear below. In addition, two focus groups, each of two hours' duration, were held. One was at City Centre Campus, and the other at South Campus. The discussion at these focus groups centered around four questions, and responses were recorded and analyzed by identifying emerging themes.

### IV THE SURVEY

A survey was sent to 225 full time and part time faculty members to complete. Of the 225 faculty members, 79 or 35% responded to the survey. In addition, two focus groups were held, one on each campus in which there is a significant presence of School of Business faculty.

### V THE FOCUS GROUPS

Two focus groups were held in November of 2007 on two campuses.

| Date    | Campus             | Room  | Time        | Number of Participants |
|---------|--------------------|-------|-------------|------------------------|
| Nov. 16 | City Centre Campus | 5-322 | 2 - 4 PM    | 11                     |
| Nov. 30 | South Campus       | 202   | Noon - 2 PM | 12                     |

Focus group participants included of those who had taken online courses, those who had taught online courses, those who had administered online courses, and those who had no experience with any of the above. Of the participants in the focus groups, 67% were full time faculty; and 33% were term faculty. An experienced facilitator conducted the sessions, and an educational media specialist was on hand to record answers via a personal response system, otherwise known as "clicker voting." A total of 23 faculty members, over a two-hour

period in each focus group, discussed the following questions:

- How important is it for the School of Business to continue to develop and offer online course offerings?
- How important is it for the School of Business to continue to develop and offer entire credentials online?
- What support is needed to help faculty develop and deliver quality online courses?
- What are the barriers and challenges that need to be overcome to accomplish this?

### VI RESULTS

Results will be discussed with respect to both the survey and the focus groups.

### VII THE SURVEY

Survey results indicated that 63% of respondents accepted the value and legitimacy of online post secondary credentials; however, 39% said they didn't know. 51% of respondents rated their course management system good or excellent; 49% rated it adequate or worse. 42% of respondents rated their ability to perform in online learning good or excellent, while 42% rated their ability adequate or worse. 6% of respondents did not use any course management system. Survey respondents, only nine of whom actually taught online courses, thought there was a definite need for more faculty training and support in teaching online courses.

Respondents would agree to *develop* online courses if they knew more about teaching such courses (45%); if there were more security measures in effect for exams and assignments (36%); if they felt that online courses had the academic rigor and quality of traditional courses (51%); if given sufficient support an resources; and if they had more confidence in the course management systems. These last two were in an "other (please specify)" category. Numbers and comments were similar for the question on whether respondents would agree to *teach* online courses.

In response to what needs to be changed, respondents were quite forthcoming. They thought there should be a plan and guidelines for online learning; that there should be more course management system support; that there should be more training for faculty; that a sense of community should be created for learners; that there should be a better understanding of the time and effort that goes into developing and teaching online courses, and the financial resources required; and that there should be a better way to judge the efficacy of such learning. Comments by respondents paralleled comments by focus group respondents. Some of these are listed below, and all comments from both activities can be found in Appendices A and B in the original paper available from the author.

The survey respondents made a total of 42 comments on the open-ended questions. Comments were grouped into eight categories as listed below, and the chart following shows the distribution of these comments by category. The sum is greater than 100% since some comments fit in more than one category.

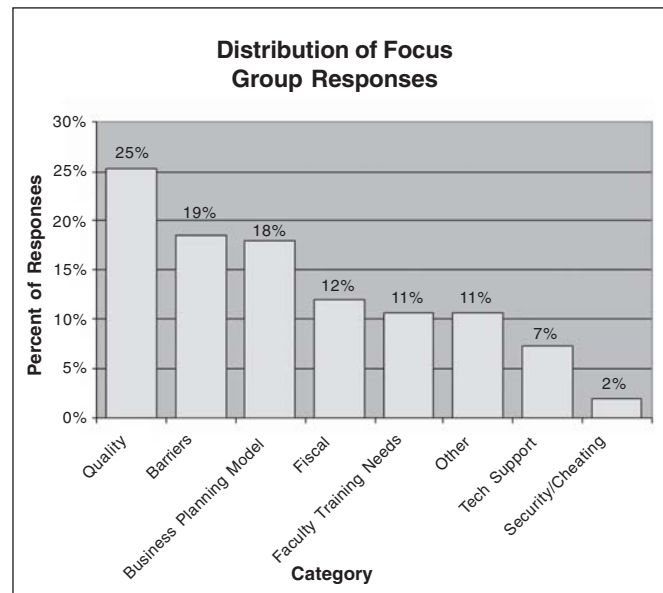
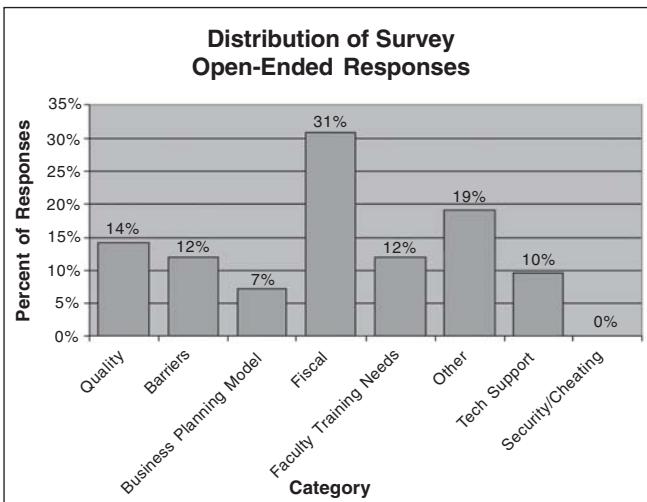
- Barriers
- Business Planning Model
- Faculty Training Needs
- Fiscal
- Quality

- Security/Cheating
- Tech Support
- Other

### VIII THE FOCUS GROUPS

The 23 focus group respondents made a total of 150 comments that were recorded. Comments were grouped into eight categories as listed below, and the chart following shows the distribution of these comments by category. For comparison purposes, the same categories are used for the focus groups as for the survey respondents. The sum is greater than 100% since some comments fit in more than one category.

- Barriers
- Business Planning Model
- Faculty Training Needs
- Fiscal
- Quality
- Security/Cheating
- Tech Support
- Other



Emerging themes from the focus groups included the need for ensuring quality in on-line and hybrid learning; that there were currently barriers that must be overcome; that there is a need for a business plan to be drafted; that there were fiscal issues that must be addressed; and that there was a pressing need for faculty training.

In the area of quality, respondents pointed out that retention rates in online courses were less than ideal, and that the idea of community needed to be preserved in online instruction. In some cases, observed one respondent, "peer to peer learning is enhanced in the online environment. It is better learning than in the classes." Said another, "it is a false dichotomy to talk about online courses. We need to talk about using effective technology to support all of our course delivery."

Several barriers were identified in the sessions. These included the fact that some students felt "bounced around" when it came to accessing learner technical support. Others pointed out that in their area, they could not get support to develop an online course because it did not fit within the authorized, provincial online course infrastructure, called eCampus Alberta. Still other participants felt that they, as instructors, had to do too much for too little remuneration, and that they should have support for a high speed Internet connection at home. And one faculty member thought, not surprisingly, that "Alberta in winter is a barrier."

In the area of a business plan, participants summed it up quite nicely by saying, "we have come to a point in MacEwan where the lead has been from the energy and emotion of individuals. Now we need to systematize it beyond the early adopters;" and "we need to identify specific student groups and target our online development strategically."

Some faculty members felt a need for training in the basics of online delivery: "we need an instructor course on how to give an online course;" and "support and assistance are needed to build skill in teaching online. Time and ability and new skill sets are required." Several

focus group participants in both sessions agreed with this felt need.

During the focus groups, polling questions were put to participants and answers were collected and displayed immediately using an automated personal response system, otherwise known as "clicker voting." 80% of those polled thought the School of Business should be very selective when choosing courses to present online; 20% disagreed. As far as participation in the focus group improving their understanding of the issues in online education, 95% said that it had. This is what would be expected in discussions such as these. When it came to supporting the value of online credentials, participants were split: 45% in favor, and 55% against.

Responses to the survey and comments made in the focus group gave rise to several additional inferences for those participating. Student, or market demand, is growing for online courses and credentials. The work of eCampus Alberta is a testimonial to this fact. A sustainable business case must be developed, together with identified needs and learning outcomes, in order for online learning to be a success. There will be a quality issue in online or hybrid courses if these areas are not addressed. Technology lends itself to the possibility of academic dishonesty in learners. And there are definitely new learners on the scene – those who may not show up to a face-to-face class except to write exams, and those who use hand held electronic devices in order to communicate with peers. These focus group outcomes must be taken into account when planning the future of online and hybrid learning at MacEwan College.

## IX LIMITATIONS

A number of limitations were apparent in this project. For the focus groups, participants did not volunteer, but rather were asked by the researcher to attend. This does not constitute a random sample, and it would therefore be incorrect to assume that conclusions drawn applied to all faculty members in the School of Business. With respect to the survey, some

pointed out that for some questions, online and hybrid learning modes were combined when they should not have been, and this led to confusion. Also, only 53 out of 79 respondents actually completed every question in the survey.

## **X RECOMMENDATIONS**

As a result of the survey and focus groups, these were the specific recommendations for the MacEwan School of Business.

1. The most important item to be addressed for online and hybrid learning is strategic planning. Desired learning outcomes must be clearly defined, needs must be identified, realities of the early 21st century (including post-secondary student profiles) must be recognized, and means must be developed to achieve the learning outcomes. Then technology can be used as a means to accomplish the outcomes. Educational technology is like the alligators that act as a distraction, when the swamp itself, or efficient and effective learning, should be the focus. This will ensure the quality of resulting online courses and programs, which was a major concern of several participating faculty.
2. More training and support needs to be given to faculty members wishing to begin or continue with online and hybrid instruction. This includes learning how to use new media; learning how to use course management systems; providing adequate funding for online course development; offering adequate compensation for delivering online courses; and disseminating current research on best practices in online instruction.
3. Enhanced technical support needs to be made available to students enrolled in online and hybrid courses.

4. A comprehensive evaluation and revision model should be devised in order to maintain quality in online courses and credentials.
5. A business plan for resource allocation for development, evaluation and revision of online and hybrid courses needs to be developed.
6. Faculty remuneration for developing and teaching online and hybrid courses needs to be made fair and equitable.

## **XI NEXT STEPS**

Beyond the recommendations above, there are two further items that should be addressed. These are:

1. Similar surveys and focus groups should be conducted in other divisions of the College.
2. A literature search should be conducted in the broad area of online and hybrid learning so that best practices can be identified. These can then inform the recommended strategic and business planning processes.

## **XII SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

In order to determine faculty attitudes and perceptions toward online and hybrid learning, a survey was given, and focus groups convened. Results were collected, summarized and analyzed. Recommendations were made for strategic planning, for more training and support for faculty, more technical support for students, and for the development of a comprehensive business plan for resource allocation for development and implementation of such courses.