

A new blended format for student conferences: the case study of Explore Econ

Abstract:

There has been a growing experimentation with designing new forms of academic events and conferences recently, due to the “virtual turn” pushed by the Pandemic. This paper discusses a new blended format of holding student conferences. This format breaks the conference into two sequential stages: (1) the asynchronous stage, where students’ research outputs are exhibited in the conference’s website and (2) the synchronous stage, which is a two-hour live event that involves showcasing the asynchronous material to the audience; live “elevator-pitch” presentations by students; and award giving. The first stage of the conference is virtual, but the second stage can be held online or in-person. Such a format seeks to harness the best features of asynchronous and synchronous modes of holding a conference. This blended format opens new doors for (a) promoting research-based education, (b) building student-staff relations and (c) empowering students by giving them new modes of expression and presence.

This paper focuses on Explore Econ as a case study of this new blended format. This is an annual conference for undergraduate economics students held by UCL Economics. The case study discussion offers some insight into pedagogical and organisation implications of holding a virtual conference for students.

Introduction

The post-COVID world of Higher Education has made us rethink many of our pedagogical principles and practices, including the way we teach, assess, build knowledge networks, develop employability skills, etc. Perhaps, it is time to rethink the way we hold academic conferences as well and explore new models. This paper discusses a new blended format of holding student conferences. This new format transforms student conferences from a half-day event that often takes place on campus to a series of asynchronous and synchronous events. In other words, it *stretches* the notion of conference by changing it from a one-day event to an ongoing learning and community-building *process* that happens throughout the academic year. This blended format can be held fully virtually or with a mixture of live on-campus events. As will be explained, this format opens new doors for (a) promoting research-based education, (b) building student-staff relations and (c) empowering students by giving them new modes of expression and presence.

Before explaining our blended format, it is helpful to describe the conventional format of student conferences. Normally, student conferences are held as a half-day live event on campus, where students present their works to internal academic staff, fellow students, and external guests. The conference may have a website that is used for uploading the selected papers and posters and making announcements in the lead up to the on-campus event. This format puts the main emphasis on the presentation of student papers/posters on the conference day. The conference's website is of secondary importance. In this format, the conference *is* a half-day live event happening on campus. Digital technologies such as the conference's website are only publicity tools around that event. This format suffers from three shortcomings. Firstly, it puts excessive emphasis on live presentations by students at the expense of celebrating and showcasing what they have *already* accomplished in their learning journey. Pedagogically, it puts too much emphasis on synchronous engagement of the audience and misses out on the new possible modes of virtual asynchronous engagement. Secondly, and relatedly, this format puts little emphasis on digital technologies as it views them as mere marketing tools for the main on-campus event rather than an integral part of conference itself. Accordingly, the conference' website is usually used merely for making announcements or uploading the final papers and posters of students. This is while the website can be used as a platform for providing support to students in their learning journey and giving them empowering presence. Finally, this format is very costly because its organisation requires a lot of administrative planning and support.

In contrast, our new blended format breaks down the conference into two stages:

(1) The asynchronous stage, where we showcase students' papers/posters in the conferences' website, together with a pre-recorded video presentation of their work. We use different tactics to actively promote engagement with this asynchronous material. For instance, we ask internal and external academics and students to vote for their favourite submissions.

(2) The synchronous stage, which is a live event that involves (a) showcasing the asynchronous material to the audience in the room (b) students giving "elevator-pitch" of their research and (c) award giving. This live event, which lasts around two hours maximum, can be held virtually or in-person.

Digital technology is an integral part of this blended conference. From the very beginning, we use the conference's website as a place for motivating and providing support to students in

their learning journey. We present the website as a pedagogical resource to students, instead of a mere marketing or announcement tool. There, they can find various material on doing literature review, data analysis, academic writing and recording and editing video presentations. In addition, we hold virtual Q&A sessions and workshops throughout the year to inspire and support students. Gradually, as students finish their preparations and submit their work, the conference’s website morphs into a showcasing platform. In the subsequent live event, we link our in-person activities such as student presentations or award giving to the material already uploaded on the website. Just to give an example, before giving the floor to students to give their elevator-pitch presentations (3 minutes) to the live audience, we project the conference’s website on screen and introduce the audience in the room to the section in which we have posted all the shortlisted papers and posters. By going “back and forth” between in-person activities and asynchronous material, we seek to create a synergy between the two stages of the conference.

This new format has several advantages. Firstly, it enhances research-based education by providing continuous support and motivation to students in their research throughout the year by constantly posting material on the website as well as holding virtual workshops and Q&A sessions. Secondly, it improves student-staff relations by combining the two modes of asynchronous and synchronous engagement. Previously, the only way for staff to engage with students’ conference was to attend the half-day on-campus event. But in this new format, the website opens the door for another mode of engagement: the staff can start engaging with students’ research before attending the live events. Thirdly, this new format empowers students as it provides them with new modes of expression and presence. In a conventional conference, too much emphasis is put on live presentations, but in a blended format, students get a chance to record (and edit) a video presentation in addition to their live performance. This not only diversifies the mode of expression for students but gives them a more lasting presence in the conference as their video presentation is posted on the website. As will be discussed further, the website can be used creatively as a platform for giving more voice and presence to students, hence promoting student ownership of the conference. Finally, the blended format is economically efficient as it compressed the live event and saves on various administrative costs, as confirmed by Basken (2021) & Skiles et al. (2022). It also extends the reach of the conference because of being online (Sipley, 2021).

Conventional conference (half-day on-campus event)	Blended conference (asynchronous presentations then a live event*)
Emphasis on live presentations	Emphasis on what students have already achieved
Staff can engage by attending the live event	Staff can engage by attending the live event and going through the website beforehand
Little emphasis on digital technology (website is used as merely a promotional tool)	Digital technology as an integral part (website is used as a motivational and pedagogical tool)
Main organisational cost: finding and arranging venues	Main organisational cost: maintenance of the website
Accessible mostly to internal staff and students	Accessible to internal and external audience
A one-off presentation by students in the event day	Live and pre-recorded presentation by students (a more lasting presence for students)

*The live event can be held virtually or in-person

This paper proceeds as follow. Section 1 briefly discusses the literature that this project relates to. The subsequent sections focus on a case study of a blended student conference: Explore Econ. This is an undergraduate student research conference in UCL's Department of Economics, organised by the Centre for Teaching and Learning Economics (CTaLE). Section two traces the history and institutional context of this conference. Sections three discusses different stages of this blended conference and outlines their pedagogical and practical implications.

1. Literature review

The idea of a blended student conference speaks to four bodies of literature. Firstly, it links with the paradigm of research-based education (Blessinger & Carfora, 2014; Brew, 2010; Fung, 2017). According to this paradigm, the best way for students to learn economics is “by doing economics” (Chaudhury, 2020). This entails students undertaking their own independent economic research and inquiry. Research-based education can be fostered through various means, one of which is to hold an annual student conference as a co-curricular activity (outside modules). The new conference format discussed here can contribute to research-based education in novel ways. First of all, it makes it easier for academics (and fellow students) to engage with students’ research as it opens a new model of asynchronous engagement. Secondly, because of putting digital technology as its integral part, this format is more able to provide motivation and support for students’ research journey throughout the academic year. Just to give you an example, virtual format makes it easier for instructors to hold Q&A sessions and workshops on an ongoing basis. Also, on students’ side, a blended platform opens the possibility of new forms of presentation (pre-recorded video and live elevator-pitch), which are nowadays considered as an essential digital skill (Arsenis, Flores, & Petropoulou, 2022; Montes, 2021).

The topic of this paper also relates to the literature on community building in Higher Education (Blakeley, 2020; Gibson, 2020). It is now even more important than before for campus-based universities to create vibrant inclusive learning communities. Arguably, the main role of such universities in the post-COVID world of Higher Education is to act as social hubs that bring students, academics, and experts from business and public sectors together (KPMG, 2020). A blended conference can contribute to community building by introducing new modes of engagement between students and staff and among students themselves. Additionally, the conference’s website can function as a “virtual umbrella” that brings together all extra or co-curricular activities that take place in the department, strengthening the sense of community. Most importantly, because of being more accessible to external audiences (Sarabipour, 2020; Siple, 2021), virtual conferences can help universities build a more global and inclusive learning community (Wu et al., 2022). The online format also makes it easier to invite alumni as well as speakers from private businesses and public sector.

This paper touches the discussions around student empowerment as well (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011). As will be explained, a blended conference makes students’ work more visible and reachable to a general audience. This is because papers and posters are showcased in the conferees’ website together with a pre-recorded presentation (asynchronous material). So, students can refer to their presentation afterwards, while this is not possible in a conventional conference. This creates a lasting presence for students, strengthening their sense of ownership of the conference as a result.

Finally, this paper contributes to the growing literature on holding virtual conferences (Basken, 2021; Grove, 2021; Popovic & Kustra, 2020). As shown in the below table: virtual technology opens the possibility for new conference formats: (a) a live virtual conference (with no asynchronous material). The only difference between this format and the conventional conference is that it is held virtually, (b) a blended conference (asynchronous stage followed by a live event on campus) and (c) a virtual blended conference (asynchronous stage followed by a virtual live event). The main upside of all these formats is that they reduce organisational cost for host institutions (Wu et al., 2022). The blended formats have an additional benefit; they compress the duration of the conference’s live event and, as a result, attract more attendance (by reducing the time commitment). A shorter live event makes it easier to integrate the conference with other live activities (virtual or on-campus), hence creating more synergy.

Different formats	Asynchronous (Virtual)	Synchronous (On campus)	Synchronous (Virtual)
Conventional Conference	-	Yes	-
Blended Conference	Yes	Yes	-
Virtual Blended Conference	Yes	-	Yes
Live virtual conference	-	-	Yes

An overall assessment of the literature suggests that an online conference, bit it blended or not, offers new formats with high pedagogical values. Of course, institutions can pick and choice among these formats based on their goals and constrains and further innovate.

2. The Explore Econ: Context and background

Explore Econ is the annual undergraduate student research conference, organised by the Centre for Teaching and Learning Economics (CTaLE) in UCL's Department of Economics. The main purpose of this conference, which has been running since 2015, is to showcase the best research conducted by undergraduate students both within and outside the curriculum. The conference also tries to strengthening the sense of community in the department by brining academic staff and students closer together. In the past two years, this conference has taken an innovative turn towards a blended format. This section gives a brief background to this conference first and then focuses on its recent transition towards a blended format. The aim here is to use Explore Econ as a case study to discuss the pedagogical implications and practicalities of holding an online student conference.

The broader institutional home of Explore Econ is University College London (UCL). With more than 40,000 students, UCL is one of the major public research universities in the UK with a campus at the heart of Bloomsbury London. The university is active in research and teaching in almost every field including medicine, natural sciences, engineering, law, social sciences and history. The UCL Economics is part of the Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences, which has about 6,000 students and 800 academic staff. The department itself has about 1,400 students and 50 academic staff, offering various programs at BSc, MSc and PhD level. The department is extremely active in terms of research and policy advice. There is a group of academics within the department, who focus on developing teaching innovations and conducting research on economics pedagogy (Centre for Teaching and Learning Economics). The Explore Econ conference was introduced by this group in 2015 for the undergraduate level.

The undergraduate programs, especially BSc Economics, constitute the bulk of student body in UCL economics (80% of students). The routine structure of the program is three years: the first two years focus mainly on core modules including principles of economics, mathematics for economics, statistical methods, microeconomics, macroeconomics, and econometrics. And the final year focuses on offering optional modules that are specialised in an economics field such as labour economics, financial economics, development economics, economics of inequality and economics of education. Each academic year is comprised of three terms where the first two terms are devoted to teaching and the final summer term to assessment. In addition to modules, we offer a variety of workshops called the "Skills Labs" that focus on developing essential employability skills like conducting literature review, data analysis, writing and presentations.

The primary aim of the Explore Econ conference is to enhance research-based education at the undergraduate level. Between 2014 and 2020, this conference followed the conventional format: there was a half-day event on campus (around five hours) where students presented their papers and posters to fellow students and departmental staff. This event was normally held towards the end of term 2 (mid-March) to ensure high student and staff attendance. The conference covered around eight paper presentations (10 minutes each) and ten poster presentations. The posters were printed and exhibited in the conference room and the papers were presented in three theme-based sessions. The climax of the conference was the award giving ceremony at the end when the winners of top papers and posters were announced.

Unsurprisingly, the 2020 pandemic made it impossible for us to hold the conference in its usual format, so we decided to take a bold and an innovative turn towards holding a blended conference.

3. Towards a blended conference:

In the past two years, we have been holding the Explore Econ as a blended conference composed of two stages. This section goes through different steps of organising this conference and discusses the pedagogical and practical implications of each step. But before doing so, it outlines the structure and timeline of the conference.

3.1 Structure and timeline of the conference

Our blended conference has two sequential parts: **Asynchronous part:** in this stage we shortlist the submissions and showcase the selected papers and posters, together with their recorded presentations, in the conference's website. This shortlisting is conducted by the conference's Scientific Committee, which is comprised of two internal students, two internal academics and four external members. Around six papers and eight posters are usually showcased. As will be explained, the main challenge at this stage is to make sure students, academics and external guests engage with the uploaded material on the website. Then, there is another round of selection, where the Scientific Committee select the top "three" papers and posters from the shortlists to give "elevator-pitch" presentations (3 minutes) at the subsequent live event.

Synchronous part (the live event): this stage involves three activities: (a) showcasing the material already uploaded on the website to the live audience (linking the asynchronous and synchronous elements together), (b) students giving "elevator-pitches" of their research to the audience and (c) award giving.

In terms of timeline, the live event is held after the exams in term 3 (mid-June). Working our way backward from this date, we start advertising the conference to students from the very beginning of term 1 (the induction week in October). The call for papers and posters is sent at the start of term 2 (mid-January). Then, we hold various virtual Q&A sessions throughout the year to provide support to students in preparing their research ideas and provide feedback on their progress. The submission deadline is set at the start of term 3 (late-April). This leaves students a whole month to prepare their final submissions; that is from late-March (when term two finishes) to late-April (when term three starts).

We officially launch the conference around late-May by starting the asynchronous stage: we post the shortlisted papers and posters on the website and devise various promotional strategies to encourage students and staff, both within and outside UCL, to engage with the uploaded material. This creates a momentum for the live event which is held after the exam, around Mid-June.

Of course, such a timeline is very much shaped by the specific term and degree structure of UCL economics. But putting specificities aside, organisation of this conference requires these general steps: initial promotion, helping students prepare their submissions, peer review of submissions, showcasing the shortlisted submission (first stage) and the live event (second stage). The remainder of this section goes through the pedagogical and practical implications of each stage.

3.2 Initial promotion

The very first challenge of running the conference is to motivate students to take part in the conference. We need to bear in mind that students usually have not much idea of what an “academic conference” is and how their participation in one can contribute to their career progression. Students may narrowly perceive a “student conference” as a purely academic event, suitable only for students who want to pursue a PhD and an academic career. Indeed, the very notion of an “academic conference” may sound intermediating for many students. So as a first step we must motivate, or break the fear of, students to take part in the conference. We do this in a live event held in the induction week. As a first step, we introduce the students to the conference’s website and encourage them to keep eye on the updates throughout the academic year. We stress that the conference is not a one-off event, but an exciting learning *journey*, with conference’s website acting as a guide and a host. For the blended format to work well, students need to get engaged with the conference’s website from early on and see it as a source of support, learning and inspiration, rather than a mere announcement forum.

The next step is to convince students to embark on this optional journey. We highlight that a conference participation “would look good” on their CV as it signals their research, writing, presentation and teamwork skills- all considered as essential employability skills (Jenkins & Lane, 2019). It is important to highlight that a blended conference makes the student’s work more visible and reachable to a general audience because, as will be explained, the papers and posters are showcased in the conference’s website together with a pre-recorded presentation (asynchronous stage). So, students can refer to their presentation afterwards, while this is not possible in the conventional format. In other words, the blended format creates a new mode of presence for students’ performance, which is more lasting. This can give further impetus to students to take part in the conference. In addition, since we have been running this blended format for two years, we can repost the past year’s papers/posters and pre-recorded presentation videos on the conference’s website, giving the new student cohort an idea what a blended conference would “look like” and embolden its visibility and reach. We also post interviews with past year’s participants, called “Spotlight on Students”, where we ask students to reflect on their learning journey during different stages of the conference. The idea is that by listening to this podcast, students would not only get motivated to take part in the conference but also get a sense of the preparation journey.

In addition to the above tactics, we seek help from our student society, the Economist’s Society, in promoting the conference as they have a better reach to the student body and are more effective in communications. Arguably, students can better explain the merits of participation in an academic conference to a fellow student, than a lecturer. Also, involving students in this stage gives them more ownership of the conference: for instance, posting a promotional opening video message by a student representative in the conference’s webpage can be empowering for new cohorts.

Finally, we mention to students that they can get involved in the organisation of the conference by applying for relevant research assistant opportunities. We normally recruit two students in the Scientific Committee of the conference for the peer review process of submission and two students in the Executive Committee to advise and help with the organisation of the conference. So, we ask students to keep an eye on the conference’s website for the advertisement of these positions and apply for them. This again, creates engagement with the conference’s website throughout the academic year and encourage students to perceive it as a dynamic platform.

3.3 Support for students

Holding a student conference entail supplying continuous support and “hand holding” to students at every stage; from topic selection to their final submission and presentation. For this purpose, we hold various online Q&A sessions and workshops (called Skills Labs) in term 1 and term 2. Again, the conference’s website acts as a crucial pedagogical tool in this stage. We post a variety of useful “how to guides” and resources on the website and then draw students’ attention to those material in the live Q&A sessions and workshops. This going “back and forth” between the live sessions and the posted material on the website is a constant feature of our support delivery for students. Crucially, the conference’s website must be seen by students as a *dynamic* educational tool that is going to support them during their research journey.

The first Q&A session, which is held right after the call for papers in term 2, is devoted to answering general inquiries about what sort of work can be submitted and how the submissions would be evaluated. This session is held online, with its recording being posted on the website afterwards. The online format makes attendance easier for students and also, allow those who miss the session to catch-up by watching the recoding.

The other aim of this Q&A session is to explain to students what a paper or a poster is and why we ask them to submit their research in those formats. Here, we direct them to the past years’ paper and poster examples posted on the website (or in case of no precedence, one can show examples from other student conferences). The word limit for papers is 1,500 words and each paper needs to be accompanied by a recorded video presentation, no more than 5 minutes. Students are welcome to edit their recorded video presentations. This gives them an digital skill. A paper needs to present a well-defined question; explain why that question is important and use analytical and statistical tools of economics to answer that question. We open the paper submissions only to second year and final year students. Posters must be submitted with a three-minute video presentation, in which students simply “go through” their poster. We post various “how to” guides for making posters in the conference’s website. The purpose of a poster is to take a concept like green monetary policy or an empirical trend such as proliferation of regional trade agreements and provide relevant conceptual analysis and/or some descriptive data or simple multiple regressions. In other words, we use a poster has to function as a “visual literature review” around a theoretical or empirical topic. We open the poster submission for all students.

As mentioned, in addition to Q&A sessions, we hold various workshops throughout the academic year to provide students with training on literature review, data analysis, writing, and presentation. All these workshops are held online, with a mixture of asynchronous and synchronous sessions.

3.3 Peer review of submissions

The peer review of papers and posters is conducted by the Scientific Committee, which is comprised of two internal academics, four “external judges” and two internal students. The “external judges” are usually comprised of academics and professional economists from corporate sector or civil service including the Economist, HSBC, UK Treasury and Bank of England. Involvement of these judges further motivates students to take part in the conference. As a promotional tactic, we announce the name of the judges in the conference’s website as soon as they confirm their role. This invites students’ engagement with the website from the onset. We also announce the student members of the Scientific Committee on the website, and

highlight their participation in the peer review process. Again, using the website as a vehicle for student empowerment. The Scientific Committee evaluates the submitted papers and posters in two rounds. In the first round, it shortlists around six papers and eight posters, to be showcased in the conference's website as examples of "good" submissions. Then in the second round, it selects the "top" three papers and posters for giving "elevator-pitch" presentations in the subsequent live event.

3.4 The asynchronous stage of the conference

The conference is formally launched at this stage. This is when we upload the shortlisted papers and posters, together with their pre-recorded presentations, in the conference's website. At this moment, the role of the website changes from a support platform to a showcase platform. The main challenge at this stage is to create excitement and engagement with the posted material. So, having a planned marketing and communication strategy is essential. A useful tactic is to post the material gradually on the website and publicise the announcement plan in advance to create excitement and momentum. We also usually post a short video on the website by the Head of the Department, the Faculty Dean or Vice-Provost of Education, in which they formally open the conference and invite academics and students to engage with the asynchronous material that is, or would be, posted on the website. We widely advertise every upload in our social media platforms to generate momentum. Once all the shortlisted submissions are uploaded, we ask students to vote for their "favourite" paper and poster. This not only promotes engagement with the posted asynchronous material but also enhances student ownership of the conference.

It is important to add in the conference's website we also showcases other co-curricular activities of our department, such as our economics photo competition (EconFrame) and the First-Year Challenge, a multimedia competition designed by Spielmann and Chaudhury (2016). In this way, the website functions as a "virtual umbrella" that brings all the department's co-curricular activities together and showcase them to students and academics both within and outside the UCL.

The other challenge at this stage is to ensure a smooth lead up to the next stage of the conference, which is the live event. Or to put it in a more promotional language, channel the momentum gathered in the first stage towards the live event, so that the two stages of the conference smoothly connect with each other. This means that in terms of scheduling, there should not be a large gap between the initial launch of the synchronous part and the subsequent live event. The uploading of papers and posters should be planned in a way that it creates a lead-up momentum to the subsequent live event.

3.5 The synchronous stage of the conference (the live event)

This stage can be held either online or in-person. Let us turn to the in-person format first. In this format, the live event will be comprised of (a) "elevator-pitch" presentations by students, (b) showcasing the conference's website (asynchronous part) to the audience in the room and (c) award giving. The duration of the in-person event is around two hours, followed by a reception. This format provides a great opportunity for socialisation between students and staff and also among students themselves, across different year groups, programs, and departments.

The blended format allows for the live event to become shorter and thus more engaging and economically efficient. So instead of holding a full-day live event of presentations, the blended format makes it possible to focus more on showcasing and celebrating what students have

already achieved (the asynchronous material). Also, a two-hour live program makes the conference more engaging for the audience and ensures a higher number of participants and a longer stay among students and academic staff. Moreover, a two-hour live event can be easily intergraded with other events across the university such as career talks, workshops, festivals etc. For instance, this year we combined the Explore Econ's live session with a workshop on "crypto currency" and a career event, generating a synergy across these activities. And of course, holding a two-hour live event is more economically efficient than a conventional half-day conference on campus as it requires less administrative support.

However, on the downside, a shorter in-person event leaves less room for live student presentations, so a compromise must be made on the number and/or duration of presentations. This is why we conduct a second round of evaluation and select the top three papers and posters from the ones already shortlisted to present in the live event. These presentations follow the format of an elevator pitch: selected students need to their paper in less than five minutes, using one slide only (poster presentations are given 3 minutes). But on the upside, this format equips the student with a new presentation skill that can become helpful in the job market.

One of the challenges of the blended format is to make sure the live event links well with the first stage, that is the asynchronous material already uploaded on the website. Accordingly, we devote a slot in the live event for showcasing different sections of the website including the shortlisted papers and posters as well as other co-curricular activities. We constantly go "back and forth" between the live activities and the asynchronous material on the website throughout the event. For instance, before giving the floor to students to give their elevator pitches to the audience in the room, we project the conference's website on screen and acknowledge all the shortlisted papers and posters. Or before revealing the winners of our other co-curricular activities such as the photo competition or the multimedia project, we go to the website and quickly going through the best submissions in these activities.

Now, let us turn to the format where the subsequent live event is held online. I label this as a "virtual blended conference" (as opposed to a blended conference). Due to the COVID pandemic, we chose this format for Explore Econ in 2021 and thus, held our live event on Zoom. But to avoid "Zoom fatigue", we kept the event at 90 minutes, containing it to showcasing the website; two elevator pitches by students, and award giving. On the upside, thanks to holding the live event online we managed to attract a much higher number of attendees (90 people) than our previous face-to-face conferences. The virtual format also allowed us to reach to new audiences such as UCL offer holders and external students and academics from UK and overseas universities. This helped us in building a larger and more inclusive learning community for our students and academics. We should bear in mind that this virtual format also widens the possibility of inviting guest speakers or attendees from corporate sector and public institutions.

Collecting feedback and self-reflection is the essential final step of our conference. This process not only helps us improve the quality of the conference but enables us to demonstrate its pedagogical impact. Thus, we collect various forms of feedback and self-reflections:

- Asking the live event's audience to fill out a survey
- Monitoring the engagement with the conference's website (counting the number of visits)
- Holding a focus group with student representatives
- Conducting a video podcast with the conference's participants (Spotlight on Students), asking them to reflect on their learning journey.

- Asking students who were involved in the peer review evaluation of submissions, to reflect on the research skills they have learned in this process via writing a blogpost.
- Asking students who were involved in the organisation of the conference to write a blogpost about the interpersonal and teamwork skills they have gained in this task.

These pieces of evaluation and feedback can be helpful for subsequent promotion of the event to the next cohort of the students as well as demonstrating the pedagogical value of this project.

Conclusion

What should be the main role of campus-based universities in the post-COVID era of Higher Education? I think it is now more important than ever for these universities to function as a social hub for bringing academics and students together to create vibrant learning communities. This means that it is essential for universities to take co-curricular activities such as holding conferences, competitions, or field trips seriously and try bold innovations by employing new digital technologies. This paper focused on one such innovation: holding a blended student conference. This new format tries to harness the best features of the asynchronous and synchronous modes of learning and engagement.

This format has two essential parts: a website that takes the students through an academic journey by giving them motivation and support and a subsequent live event (online or in person) that brings staff and students together to showcase and celebrate students' journey. For this format to work properly students need to engage with the conference's website early on and more importantly perceive the website as a support hub and a place where they can find useful material for developing their research, writing and presentation skills. In other words, the website must be seen by students as a *dynamic* educational resource that would lead them in their learning journey throughout the academic year, rather than a mere platform for showcasing the final research outputs.

The other necessary element is that there needs to be a two-way connection (going back and forth) between the website and all live activities that take place throughout the academic year such as Q&A sessions and workshops. And next, there needs to be a smooth and close transition between the asynchronous stage and the subsequent live event. Finally, activities in the live event needs to be connected to the material already posted on the website, resulting in a synergy between the two stages of the conference.

This new format has several advantages. Firstly, it enhances research-based education by providing continuous support and motivation to students in their research journey throughout the year by constantly posting material on the website as well as holding live virtual workshops and Q&A sessions. Secondly, it improves student-staff relations by combining the two modes of asynchronous and synchronous engagement. Previously, the only way for staff to engage with a student conference or other co-curricular activities was to attend a half day event on campus. But in this new format, the website opens the door for another mode of engagement: the staff can start engaging with students' research well before attending the live event. In addition, the conference' website can function as an umbrella that brings all co-curricular activities of the department together, further fostering community building and student-staff engagement. Thirdly, this new format empowers students as it provides them with new modes of presence and expression. In a conventional conference, too much emphasis is put on live presentations, but in a blended format, students get a chance to pre-record a video presentation in addition to their live performance. This not only diversifies the mode of expression for students but gives them a more lasting presence in the conference as their video presentation is posted on the website. The blended format also allows the live event to focused more on celebrating and showcasing what students have already achieved in terms of research and other co-curricular activities throughout the academic year, instead of putting too much emphasis on live presentations of papers and posters. Finally, the blended format is economically efficient as it compresses the live event and thus, saves on various administrative costs.

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