

Practising what we preach: Online learning for EFMD Programme Accreditation

Turning multiple in-person, international seminars into one online event. **Robert Galliers, Jens Petter Tøndel,** and **Barbara Sporn** reflect on their experience of this year's EFMD Programme Accreditation workshops



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As the Director for EFMD Programme Accreditation was saying back in 2020, “Things are going so well!” The EFMD Board’s decision to rebrand EFMD programme accreditation was implemented without a hitch, with a shift from EPAS to *EFMD Accredited* in the spring of 2019 (enabling, among other things, better featuring of specific programmes, and allowing EQUIS schools to seek accreditation for their flagship and/or innovative programmes). Guideline documents had been revised in line with the new policy; interest in programme accreditation continued to accelerate; more and more programmes – from undergraduate through to doctorate level – were being accredited.

Demand for programme accreditation had been steadily increasing since the launch of EPAS in 2005. For example, the number of programmes reviewed had increased by 260%, from just 48 in the five-year period up to 2010, to 173 over the 2015-2020 period. By the end of 2020, 120 programmes had been accredited worldwide. Interest from EQUIS-accredited schools was growing with, for example, the University of St. Gallen (Switzerland), Rennes School of Business, Toulouse School of Management, ESCP and SKEMA (France), Nottingham Trent University (UK), CEIBS (China) and Curtin University (Australia) among others – with programmes covering the whole gamut, from undergraduate, to MBA, to PhD – setting the pace.

And then... COVID-19 struck. From an institutional perspective, the reaction was immediate and comprehensive; it had to be. Institutions throughout the world had to go into overdrive, endeavouring to ensure that their programmes remained accessible to their students – wherever they happened to be at the time. Faculty members were having to rethink course delivery to facilitate learning at a distance. On-line learning became the norm. Physical learning opportunities at partner institutions abroad became impossible. In-company projects and internships were under threat. How might such opportunities still be

provided despite the pandemic? How might digital technologies be harnessed to ensure that student learning was not disrupted? In short, elements of EFMD Programme accreditation were affected at many schools.

The response from EFMD Quality Services was similarly immediate and comprehensive. Demand for programme accreditation had been increasing still further but physical peer review visits were now out of the question and no less than 24 such visits had to be put on hold. The EFMD Accredited team went into overdrive. Revised guidelines for virtual peer reviews were developed and revised dates and teams were arranged. Indeed, the first online peer review took place as early as June 2020. In all, 65 virtual peer reviews will have taken place by the end of 2021 ... with more to come in 2022.

By mid of 2021, 24 new programmes had been declared eligible and a further 6 had applied, making a total of 30 new programmes in the system, with many being delivered outside of Europe, by schools in Central Asia, Latin and North America as well as the Far East. The EFMD Programme Accreditation team continued to deliver all services in an online format (e.g., providing advisory peer services, consulting with schools on accreditation). Still, the call for a seminar from those schools in the pipeline became louder and eventually led to – what we think – was an innovative response.

An innovative response: The 2021 online Workshop

In normal times and in any given year, EFMD programme accreditation would offer three or four seminars in various locations around the world (e.g., Brussels, Prague, Miami, Rome), attended by some 100 participants per year. As a consequence of the pandemic, no seminars were held in 2020 until the very end of the year – on the contrary, schools were being advised on an individual basis. But the growing numbers of schools seeking accreditation made it clear that the EFMD Programme Accreditation team had to offer a new format of training in an online environment. The idea of a modularised workshop was born.

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Based on previous experiences and the ongoing interactions with schools, an online *workshop* (rather than a seminar) was devised. The objective was developed quickly: we wanted to offer a format suitable for all types of schools and programmes (interested schools, schools in the pipeline seeking eligibility, and schools which have already been declared eligible that are preparing for their peer review) and we wanted to be personally *working with participants* rather than simply lecturing. Thus, the EFMD Programme Accreditation team was faced with a quandary: how to make the workshop accessible and relevant, despite the wide-ranging needs of those wanting to participate? Clearly, a combination of the introductory and advanced seminars was required, but how could this be effectively achieved virtually?

The answer emerged, based on our experience with online programme delivery and past seminars. Principles of flipped classrooms and important lessons on virtual learning from the EOCCS team within EFMD were applied. The workshop was thus designed, based on the following ideas:

- *The 'Y' model* – All workshop participants were exposed to the same content (“common body of knowledge”): the EFMD Programme Accreditation Standards and Criteria were presented jointly by the EFMD Programme Accreditation Directors in an interactive format. Following that, participants split into “subject” groups (i.e., one group for those in the pre-



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their own situation. Additionally, the Datasheet/SAR case was a much-appreciated example which facilitated preparation and discussion. In this sense, by encouraging participation prior to and during the session, plus on-going networking afterwards, the workshop could add real value.

In total, there were 42 participants from 29 schools and 19 countries (e.g., from South America, Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and Asia). 10 Schools from the pre-eligibility phase were represented alongside 19 from the post-eligibility phase. Altogether, we ran 3 parallel working groups.

The Views of the Participants

The evaluation shows that the workshop was viewed as very helpful and the EFMD Programme Accreditation team learned a great deal from the experience. The format was rated as highly satisfactory and, most importantly, we were able to meet the immediate demand to provide advice to over 40 colleagues from 29 institutions who are at various stages of the programme accreditation process.

eligibility phase, and another for those in the post-eligibility phase). These smaller groups worked interactively to understand the development of a datasheet or self-assessment report (SAR) respectively. The majority of time was dedicated to Q&A, working in those groups, and networking given required pre-workshop preparation.

- *Preparation is key* – A compulsory online preparation session two weeks prior to the workshop helped to explain the format, set expectations, and, most importantly, facilitate networking among participants who were assigned working groups. Then, a week before the workshop, all slides and a sample datasheet and SAR from a successful school were shared – again in order to help participants prepare thoroughly.

- *Participation as a key success factor* – By establishing working groups prior to the workshop, participants could reflect on their own situation in light of the principal EFMD programme accreditation requirements and come prepared with key questions relevant to



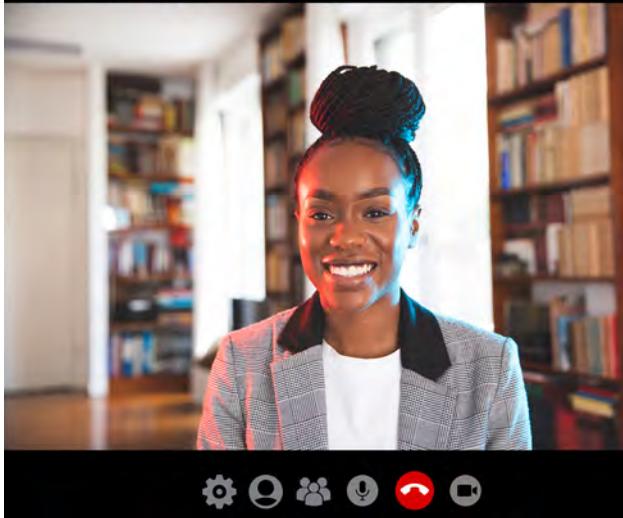


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Some very useful advice came from the participants in terms of making the experience even more worthwhile, including the following points:

- Including guest speakers: the sharing of experience from schools that went through the accreditation process in a live talk.
- More time for networking: participants should be able to form communities of learning that would sustain the workshop and help sharing of experience in the future.
- Learning from mistakes: even though best examples are very useful, learning from mistakes would be appreciated. Participants are interested to learn what to avoid and what had worked less well in the past.
- Use of online material: videos or other online learning tools could be used further to free up valuable time for interaction.
- Focus: participants benefit the most if they are in a learning environment that caters especially to their needs. Hence a good mix of general sessions with specific sessions is appreciated.



Quo vadis?

Overall, the workshop on EFMD Programme Accreditation worked well in an online setting. The different aspects emerging from the participants' feedback point us in the right direction to make the workshop even more useful in the future. We are considering three areas in particular.

First, the intention is to maximise the focus on participants' preparation for the workshop (reading EFMD Programme Accreditation Standards and Criteria, study the available material in the form of a datasheet, SAR, visiting schedule, etc., and preparing specific questions relevant for participants). Based on this foundation, we – as facilitators rather than presenters – can be even more focused on participants' actual learning needs.

Second, the workshop needs to provide enough time to facilitate interaction and networking. For this, lengthy presentations need to be avoided and attention will be paid to explicating certain participant-driven concerns. Materials will be made available well ahead of time so there can be even more focus on discussion, Q&A, and networking.

Third, different new elements can be introduced (e.g., avoidable mistakes) by sharing examples of documents (with permission of course), video material for pre-workshop viewing (e.g., explaining certain standards or introducing guest speakers from accredited programmes). With this, we hope to make the workshop even more relevant for participants in the future.

After the first workshop and the feedback from our peers, we firmly believe that, while the first online workshop was offered in an effective format, we can improve certain elements further. We are now confident that we can repeat the workshop – this will take place early in 2022. Please look out for the announcement. We look forward to seeing you there!



About the Authors

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