Top 14 trends in online examinations in 2021
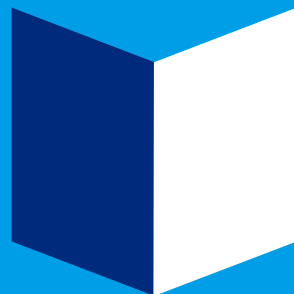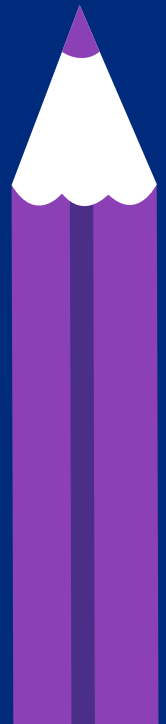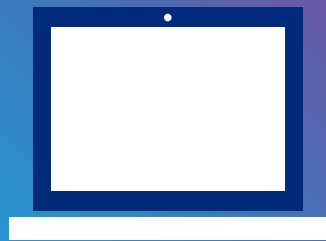
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Introduction

The year gone by has been tumultuous for sectors worldwide, cutting across industries. COVID-19 pandemic derailed processes and posed continuity-related questions, underlining the problems emanating from overwhelming dependence on traditional processes. However, nowhere has this gap and reliance on the conventional approach been more glaring than in the education sector- and by extension, examinations. Universities and colleges have relied on traditional means of assessments for several reasons.

Some of them are justified because they must cater to all students, irrespective of their digital depth and access to computers and the internet. However, such an approach has pitfalls that were all too visible when universities and colleges globally found themselves caught between maintaining continuity and safeguarding the lives of all stakeholders involved in giving and taking exams.

So how did stakeholders manage "continuity" amid such an unprecedented disruption? How did they offer exams? What all exams did they offer? What challenges did they face in pivoting to the digital ecosystem, and how was their experience of employing one of the many online examination platforms available on the market? What are educators thinking about giving exams in 2021 and beyond?

Will they take the digital route, adopt the hybrid model or revert to the old-school method of pen-and-paper assessments. Such questions assume massive significance as COVID-19 is far from over. Countries are experiencing recurring surges of infection, and the timeline for going back to 'normal' remains nebulous at best.

The need was to decode these questions and find answers to understand how the sector was gearing up to offer examinations amid several unknown unknowns.

Mercer | Mettl recently conducted a massive survey involving 650 senior education sector stakeholders, including deans, HODs and examination administrators, among others, to understand how the education sector fared during the pandemic. The survey findings have been compiled in a tell-all report titled 'The state of online examinations 2021,' which outlines extensive trends, insights and the road ahead for the education sector.

This eBook outlines select trends, which will give you unparalleled insights into the journey, experience and challenges that universities and colleges faced in taking the digital route. It also deep-dives to assess the processes where online examinations matched or exceeded the experience of giving assessments, compared to offline exams. Besides, it outlines a wish list, a roadmap of sorts, from educators, suggesting the areas where they expect more improvement in the available processes and mechanisms from service providers.

So, let us take a look at the top 14 trends in examination management in 2021 and beyond.
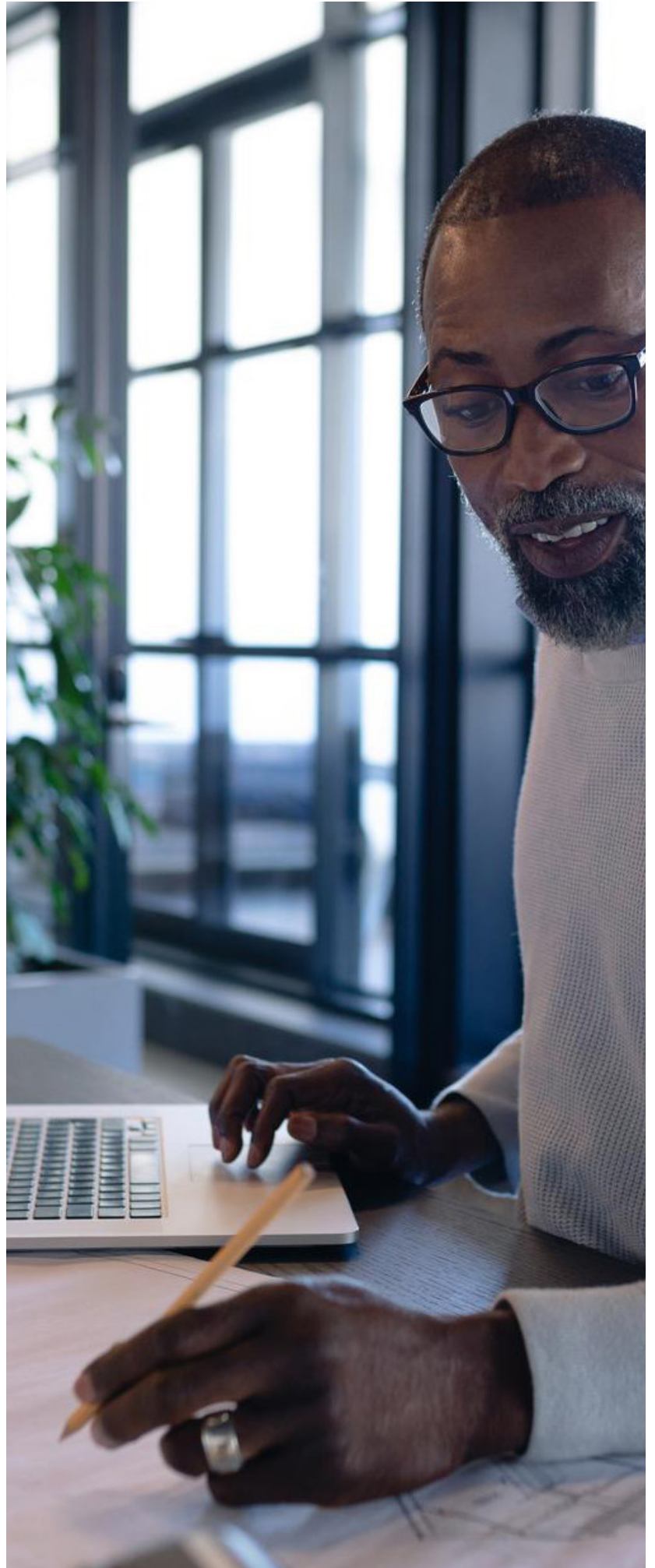
Top 14 trends you must know

1. Offline exams was the way to go before the COVID-19 pandemic occurred

More than half of respondents, 56%, reported having never conducted online examinations before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This data finding underlines the overwhelming preference for traditional, center-based tests among universities and colleges, implying that the education sector has been one of the late adopters of technology. It also emphasizes the lack of preparedness or alternatives, which may have exacerbated academia's challenges in moving to the digital ecosystem after the disruption set in.
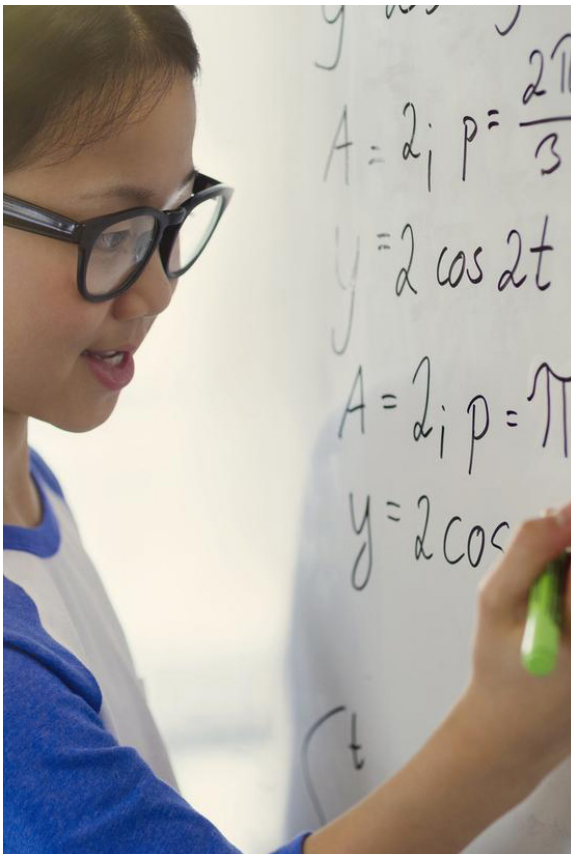
2. Universities and colleges made an epic pivot toward the online ecosystem after the contagion set in

Over 56% of respondents reported employing online assessment platforms to conduct online examinations remotely since the onset of the contagion. It indicates that the education sector demonstrated remarkable alacrity in moving tests to the online ecosystem. This swift pivot is all the more commendable as the previous data point suggests that most of them had no prior experience of conducting online exams. Therefore, educators familiarized themselves with the process and established the necessary digital infrastructure swiftly, ensuring they could offer online assessments, arguably in record time.

In a related data finding, only one out of ten respondents reported having postponed or canceled exams, which underlines the stakeholders' resilience and commitment to maintaining procedural continuity.

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3. Colleges gave semester exams over all else

Almost 64 percent of respondents reported using online examination platforms to conduct semester exams for final year students. In a related finding, another 54 percent informed that they used digital assessment platforms for semester exams involving non-final year students. These numbers indicate that universities and colleges considered internal evaluations their foremost priority and wanted to ensure that students received their degrees and got promoted to senior academic terms. The findings again underline that faculty and academia, in general, were fixated on ensuring educational and examination continuity amid an unprecedented disruption.

It is also an encouraging revelation because semester exams are usually more complicated, involve distinct streams of students studying vastly different subjects. This trend implies that the education sector has employed online exam platforms in vast numbers and offered qualitatively more complex assessments in semester exams, which bodes well for the future of exams.

4. Cheating prevention is the most significant concern in giving online exams

Almost 6 out of 10 respondents, 57%, underline "the lack of complete trust and assurance in cheating prevention techniques" as their most pressing concern in offering online examinations. This data suggests that providing tests with integrity and in a sanitized environment takes precedence for academia over all else. Cheating had also topped the list of concerns in the Mercer | Mettl Online Examinations Survey Report 2020. Therefore, the finding suggests continuity.

The survey result should encourage service providers to focus on augmenting their platforms' anti-cheating prowess as educators are likely to assess platforms' anti-cheating features before choosing them.
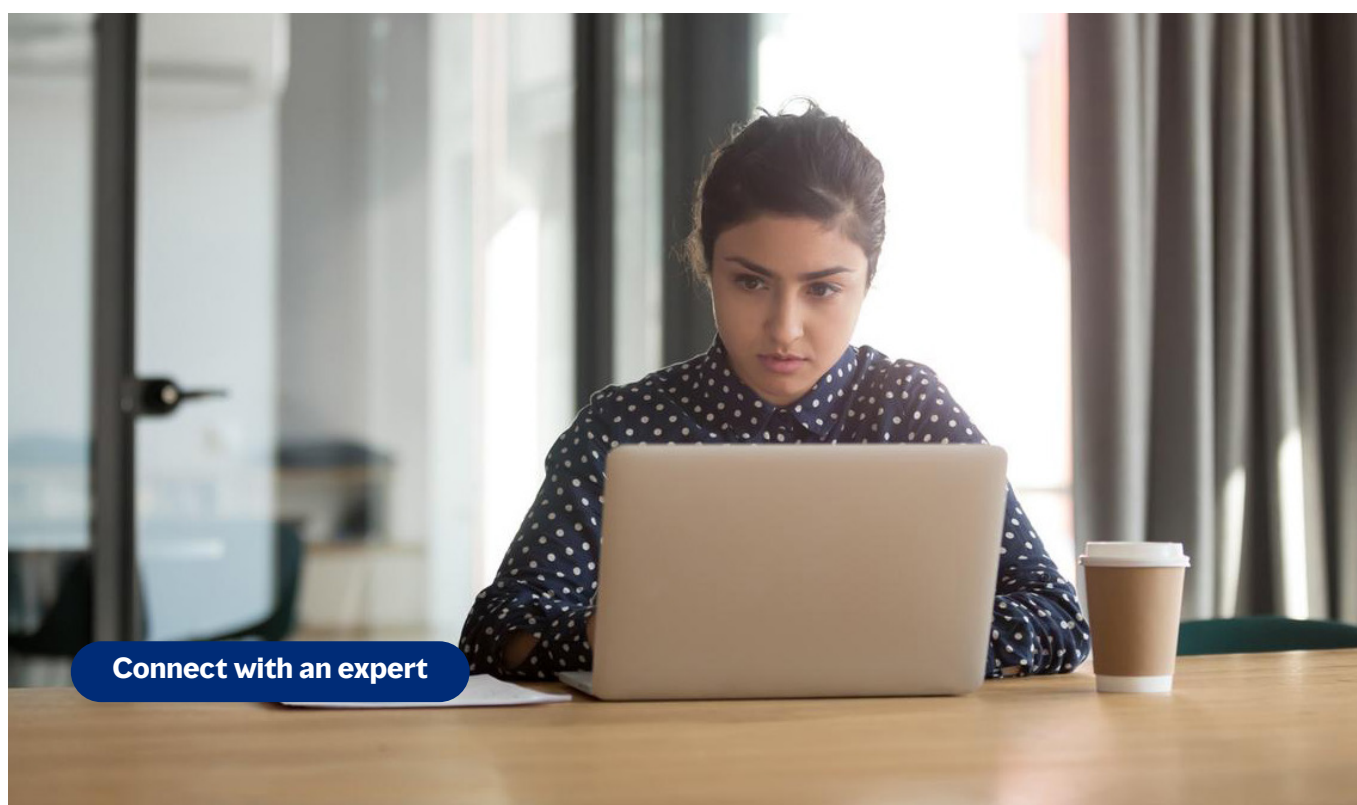
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5. The lack of familiarity with online examination platforms is the foremost bottleneck in taking the digital route

Every one out of two respondents, 50%, reports the lack of familiarity with online examination platforms and processes as the most significant challenge in giving digital assessments. The finding underlines the overwhelming dependence on the conventional means of conducting examinations, which has partially led to a generation of tech-averse academia. The digital divide is apparent!

This data revelation also indicates that service providers need to do more to educate and familiarize universities and colleges with the workings of platforms and processes. The fear of the unknown and a perception that online exam platforms are complicated systems need to change. Service providers must take the lead to alter this unfavorable perception through open-ended dialogues and concerted outreaches.

6. Online examinations is a scalable alternative, believes the education sector

Fifty-two percent of respondents found online examinations a scalable and highly productive alternative to center-based exams or an unfamiliar terrain at the onset, which eventually turned out to be a better and more scalable alternative to offline exams. These outcomes demonstrate that, despite the perceived technical complexities, online examination platforms are scalable and easy-to-use alternatives, perhaps requiring rudimentary training for those entirely unfamiliar with digital processes. However, with some practice and understanding of their workings, they can be deployed quickly to conduct exams of all hues.

It also suggests that while online exams have made considerable headway, service providers still have a long way to go in addressing perception and functionalities issues concerning assessment platforms.

7. Setting up question papers in the online mode is qualitatively superior to the offline means of assessment

Almost half of the respondents, 46%, reported designing and setting up question papers as "qualitatively superior" to offline or center-based exams. This finding is an emphatic validation of the distance traversed by online examination platforms since their inception. These platforms now offer a superior experience compared to their conventional counterparts in critical areas such as setting up question papers, which is a long-drawn, consultative and complicated process.

It also indicates that technological advances are empowering academia to offer various exams using multiple question types, expanding the scope and extent of the applications of online assessments.

8. Managing the examination evaluation process is the most superior aspect of giving online exams

Over four out of ten survey respondents, 42%, reported "managing the exam evaluation or the grading process" as the most superior aspect of giving exams using online platforms. Evaluation of answer sheets is a time-consuming and resource-intensive process and open to leakages and errors. It is also an intense administrative undertaking, which requires considerable coordination among faculty, controllers of examinations and others. **The survey finding implies that online exam platforms alleviate many of these concerns, lending ease, speed and heightened accuracy to the evaluation process.**

9. Colleges give a big thumbs up to online examination platforms, report high satisfaction

An overwhelming three-fourth of all respondents, 76%, believe that online examination service providers have addressed either all or most of their exam-related requirements. However, some areas of improvement remain. This data finding is a seminal moment for service providers and indicates a broader acceptance of digital assessment mechanisms in the times ahead. It also suggests that the education sector believes it has crossed the rubicon where it can adopt technology as the mainstream means to offer exams. It believes that its most critical requirements have already been solved.

The pivot from most respondents not using digital evaluation platforms before the pre-COVID-19- times to them reporting high satisfaction levels now is a ringing endorsement of the quality of platforms and proctoring available on the market.

The growth of technology mandates continued changes and tweaks to make them more user-friendly, advance and all-encompassing. However, the distance traveled thus far is no less extraordinary.

10. Secure exam browsers are most effective in cheating prevention

Over half of all respondents, 51%, have ranked "a secure exam browser to restrict access to unauthorized websites while taking online exams" as the most beneficial feature in cheating prevention. Secure exam browsers do not allow test-takers to access restricted websites, use three-finger swipes, cut-copy-paste, etc., ensuring a highly restricted exam environment. It also offers the functionality of accessing safelisted websites as desired by exam-giving authorities. Such impeccable features and functionalities have contributed to its high popularity among survey respondents as the top feature to offer cheating-free digital assessments.

11. Augmented cheating prevention mechanisms is high on educators' wish list

Service providers have made notable advances in cheating prevention methodologies, with multiple tools and features, such as secure exam browsers, AI and human proctoring and candidate authentication, etc. However, cheating prevention continues to remain high on the agenda among academia.

Almost 7 out of 10 respondents, 68%, expect further advances and better mechanisms to clamp down on cheating to ensure fair and transparent virtual examinations. This finding again stresses the importance of cheating-free exams and hints at why the academic community favors traditional tests.

Furthermore, it points to a widespread belief in conventional assessments offering better quality control than their digital counterparts. Therefore, service providers need to do more to assuage these real and perceived concerns to instill greater credibility in giving online assessments by further fool-proofing anti-cheating mechanisms.
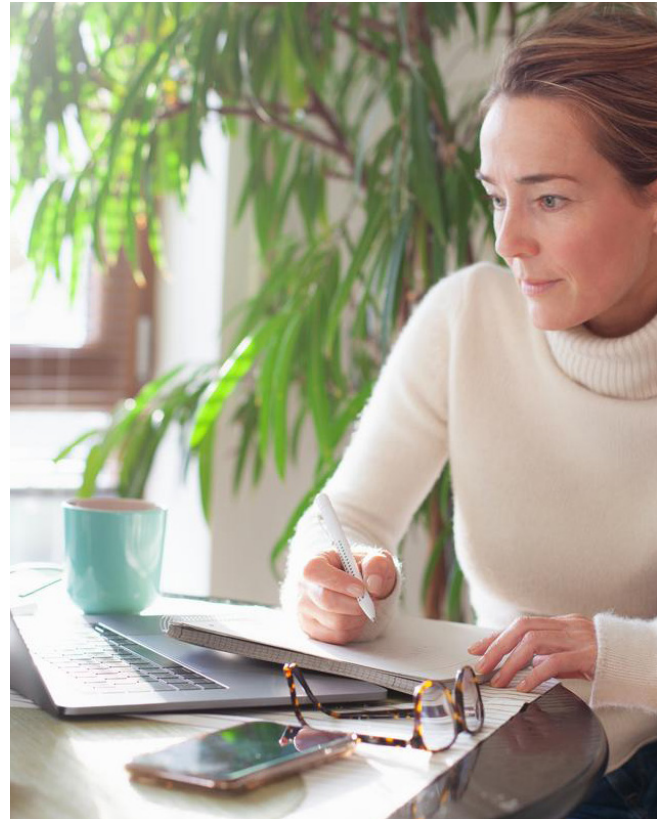
12. The pricing of online exam platforms is not a major concern

Almost half of all respondents, 48%, believe that online exams are less expensive than center-based assessments, which is an eye-opening finding. Online examinations and tech-based interventions are usually perceived to be more resource-intensive, which has traditionally been one of the prohibiting factors in their lack lustered adoption among academia. However, such misconceptions have dissipated as increasing numbers of universities and colleges have employed virtual testing platforms in the past year, eyeing procedural continuity. These numbers would only grow from here as more education centers take to online exam platforms, encouraged by peer recommendations – as the academic ecosystem is a closely-knit fraternity of professionals.

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13. Colleges believe that they are better placed to conduct online exams

Seventy percent of all respondents believe they are better placed to conduct examinations after employing processes and having given virtual assessments. This data suggests that educational institutions now exhibit much greater belief in the services available on the market. They have also established the necessary prerequisites in computers, technologically aware and digitally literate faculty and staff, and have overcome their actual and perceptual issues concerning online examinations. These numbers indicate a greater thrust toward digital assessments in the months and years ahead.

14. The hybrid model of exams is the flavor of the season

Over 6 out of 10 respondents, 63%, plan to offer hybrid examinations in 2021 and beyond, meaning a mix of remote and center-based tests. The education sector will likely continue to employ online remote assessments till the situation returns to normal, factoring in health and safety considerations.

However, it intends to use online platforms equally to give digital exams remotely, even after returning to 'normal.' This trend indicates that they trust the offerings and believe that digital means can help meet their critical and non-critical examination requirements. Their deployment is likely to depend on several factors, including the stakes of the assessments, the type of examination, etc.

Conclusion

The sector's swift embrace of online examination platforms has safeguarded millions of students' careers, allowing them to move onto subsequent academic terms, or seek suitable employment opportunities.

The year gone by has also adequately demonstrated the resilience of the education sector – that made a significant course correction, arguably in record time. The bigger challenge, however, lies ahead. All stakeholders would need to ensure that these gains are sustained in the long term to insulate the sector from more such unforeseen disruptions.

The data insights indicate that the sector will continue to use a judicious mix of offline and online exams. The decision will be based on several factors, with foremost consideration to ensuring equal access to examinations and a level-playing field to all students without discrimination.

However, it is equally valid that online tests will continue to assume a more mainstream status in the pantheon of assessments. The report indicates that this shift is a more sure-footed longer-term transition than a perfunctory arrangement to tide over this ongoing crisis.

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At Mercer | Mettl, our mission is to enable organizations to make better people decisions across two key areas: acquisition and development. Since our inception in 2010, we have partnered with more than 4,000 corporates, 31 sector skills councils/government departments and 15+ educational institutions across more than 90 countries.

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