

# FORUM

MEMBER  
MAGAZINE

*Discussing international education*



**06** DIGITAL INTERNATIONALISATION: A LOOK BENEATH THE SURFACE

**18** TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SKILLS FOR STAFF

**24** IN CONVERSATION WITH DOMINIC ORR

**28** DATA BREACHES: UNDERSTANDING THE THREAT

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## 06

“Unlike earlier cultural frames, our ‘bubbles’ are not based on national or regional narratives, but are increasingly built across digital networks of meaning”

DIGITAL INTERNATIONALISATION:  
A LOOK BENEATH THE SURFACE

## 18

“If students born and raised in the past two decades find it difficult to use the system, how can we expect staff to absorb it at such a fast pace?”

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SKILLS FOR STAFF



## 24

“Digitalisation is not a goal in itself: it’s about harnessing digitalisation to achieve the goals we’ve been pursuing all this time”

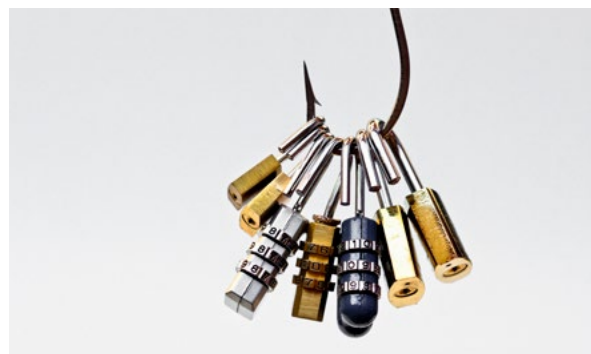
IN CONVERSATION WITH DOMINIC ORR



## 28

“The reality of today is that it is not *if* we will experience an attack, but *when*”

DATA BREACHES: UNDERSTANDING THE THREAT



# EDITORIAL

What effect is digitalisation having on your work in international education? And how is it re-shaping the nature of the student experience in international higher education? As campuses across Europe and around the world move temporarily to online delivery in response to the COVID-19 crisis, there could not be a more opportune time to reflect on the benefits and challenges of alternative virtual environments for internationalisation. In this edition of *Forum*, we look at a range of ways in which digital solutions are supporting professional and academic staff, as well as students, to re-frame international learning and collaboration.

The increasing availability and accessibility of digital platforms also allows for efficiency gains in institutional processes, while blended learning options offer flexibility to learners and instructors alike. However, increasing digitalisation also leads to concerns about equity and access. Are all students now digital natives? Is stable online access a reality in all parts of the world? And what about effective training and support for professional and academic staff to allow them to leverage digital tools to best effect?

The EAIE is delighted that Dr Dominic Orr, an expert on open education and digital learning, agreed to be interviewed for this edition. Dr Orr is an Adjunct Professor for Management in Education at the University of Nova Gorica (Slovenia) and works as Research Lead at the Kiron educational platform and NGO. In his interview, he highlights that digitalisation should not be a goal in itself,

but rather that we should harness digitalisation to achieve the goals of internationalisation and international education. As followers of research on international higher education will recognise, this closely echoes earlier reflections on internationalisation, which is not considered to be a goal in itself, but a means to enhance quality within and beyond the institution.

Setting the scene for this edition is Jon Rubin, Founder of the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Center at the State University of New York (SUNY) and its Director from 2006 to 2017. Jon reflects on a series of metaphors to describe the digitalisation of internationalisation and challenges us to consider the digitised cultural bubbles we have created in a world where facts appear to have lost their solidity. Having thrown down this metaphorical gauntlet, a number of contributors to this edition then outline the teaching and learning transformations which digitalisation has enabled, from blended learning to digital classrooms and virtual exchange. Providing an example from the Australia-UK alliance between Monash University and the University of Warwick, Kate Aldred and Emma Barker give a fascinating insight into how two institutions on opposite sides of the planet have used digital technologies to build an international student research community.

Later in the edition, a series of articles focuses on how digitalisation can be carefully deployed to ensure inclusivity, specifically for disadvantaged students and for those in developing countries. In parallel, another set of contributions shines a light on some of the administrative concerns



at play, including the move to electronic academic records, questions about data breaches and the thorny question of digital literacy for staff. While academic and professional staff may find themselves lagging behind students in their willingness to adopt new technologies, Sally Wyatt points to a new interdisciplinary Bachelor's degree in Digital Society which is enabling students at Maastricht University (Netherlands) to gain the skills to critically assess, anticipate and shape the social, political and cultural impacts of digital transformations.

As always, I am grateful to my colleagues on the EAIE Publications Committee for their expert support in reviewing submissions for this edition of *Forum*. As many of us now face the prospect of working and teaching remotely in the coming weeks (and perhaps months), we hope that this edition will provide some inspiration for the interesting times ahead.

— DOUGLAS PROCTOR, EDITOR  
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# CONTRIBUTORS

## *Jon Rubin*

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A Fulbright Fellowship to Belarus in 1999 set Jon's career in international education in motion. He founded the SUNY COIL Center in 2006, and in his free time enjoys bike riding.

## *Piet Van Hove*

**Director, International Relations Office, University of Antwerp, Belgium**

Curiosity and serendipity led Piet to a career in international education right after university. Despite writing on Collaborative Online International Learning, he finds the term 'virtual' to be virtually useless.

## *Emma Barker*

**Journal and Conferences Manager, Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning, UK**

Emma came to internationalisation via a career in book publishing. Nowadays she can often be found listening to a true crime podcast while working on her latest cross-stitch project (when not busy with her three children).

## *Kate Aldred*

**Academic Coordinator, International Conference of Undergraduate Research, Monash University, Australia**

As a result of her own inspiring undergraduate experience, Kate now specialises in undergraduate research partnerships and online delivery of international programmes. In her spare time, you'll find her in a Melbourne café or at the park with her dog.

## *Jörg-U. Kessler*

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Jörg has a background in English and Applied Linguistics. His interests range from international publications on second language acquisition to curriculum development for international programmes.

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Nina has been interested in internationalisation since writing a thesis on the experiences of international students for her first degree. She has studied in Germany, Namibia, Poland and Austria.

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Dragana completed her undergraduate education at two highly internationalised universities, which helped inspire her current work with digital academic records. In her free time she often reads e-books and writes poetry.

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After growing up in a small town in the American Midwest, Juanita's curiosity about the rest of the world led her to study in Spain and Japan. In her spare time she likes to rollerblade.

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Ceren loves positively influencing students and colleagues with her ideas and energy. She has studied in Turkey and Spain, and her favourite insect is the bumble bee.

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William was drawn to external mobility advising after studying abroad in London and teaching English in Spain. In addition to his work in international education, he is also a professional actor.

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Seija has always been interested in foreign cultures and peoples. Outside of work she enjoys various kinds of sports including cross-country skiing, running, swimming and hiking.

## *Sally Wyatt*

**Professor of Digital Cultures, Maastricht University, the Netherlands**

Sally developed an appreciation for learning with people from different backgrounds while studying in Canada, England and the Netherlands. In her spare time, Sally can be found on a yoga mat.

A large iceberg floating in the ocean, with a significant portion submerged below the surface. The water is a deep blue, and the sky is a lighter blue. The iceberg's surface is jagged and textured, while the submerged part is smooth and dark blue.

**DIGITAL** \_\_\_\_\_  
**INTERNATIONALISATION**  
**A LOOK**  
**BENEATH**  
**THE**  
**SURFACE**

The rise of digital technology could in many ways be said to have fueled our current moment of resurgent nationalism and negotiable facts. As globalisation and digitalisation continue to reorient our sense of self, how can we reframe international education and the internet as tools for navigating this era of digital diversity and its discontents?

**W**e live in an increasingly digitalised world, where facts appear to have lost their solidity and often morph into their own antitheses before our eyes. Truth seems to exist only to the extent that incoming information can pass through unconscious filters and into the cultural ‘bubbles’ that enclose each of us. These bubbles guide us, like tribal knowledge acquired from imagined ancestors, but often are mysterious and invisible to our own perceptions. Unlike earlier cultural frames, these bubbles are not entirely based on national or regional narratives, but are increasingly built across digital networks of meaning. While cultural hybridity has been with us ever since humans began to travel and emigrate, that transformation is now taking place virtually, as people meet and share their thoughts without meeting physically.

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Unlike earlier cultural frames, our ‘bubbles’ are not based on national or regional narratives, but are increasingly built across digital networks of meaning

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The iceberg has long been a trope of intercultural sensitivity and it is usually presented as a metaphorical object to which our attention is drawn. Certain cultural attributes are indicated as being above the waterline and are therefore visible, while other more

subtle aspects are presented as being hidden, below the surface. We are encouraged to look under the waterline to better understand the attitudes of those others with whom we may work or study, so that we do not run aground in cultural misunderstandings as we engage. The iceberg metaphor embodies an unstated power, because we all know that colliding with what lies below the surface can lead to catastrophe – and we do not want our efforts at communication or collaboration to sink beneath the waves.

Digitalisation may have significantly affected this metaphor, or at least made its oversimplicity more obvious. We do not only *look* at icebergs, but we ourselves *are* icebergs looking outward, and our vision is linked to many other hunks of ice floating along near us in the digital stream. Just as those living for generations in a region may develop congruencies of thought that are later described as their ‘culture’, almost all of us are now immersed in digital information flows that shape our beliefs and realities.

When we view the world, some of us may still see icebergs – while others may instead see castles or canyons – as shapes are so easily translated and transmogrified by suggestions embedded in the internet. This may be why truth seems so evanescent. At the same time, because the internet largely obscures our embodied selves, we more easily attach ourselves to ideas and images sometimes intended to reinforce prior prejudices, without the caution or criticality we observe in the street. The seeming fluidity of the digital space thereby gradually encourages us into digitised cultural bubbles that then separate us.

**AN EVER-EXPANDING ICEBERG**

Another way to view the evolution of the iceberg metaphor is to posit that the hidden underwater spread of the iceberg has greatly expanded, because it no longer emanates from a single iceberg, but now grows from the accretion of other digital ice flows attaching to it below the surface. In this way, new masses are formed, each with their own composite ‘cultures’. Meanwhile, the lone iceberg may still appear to the casual observer as though it is unchanged, while deep below it represents a mindset totally transformed. Only by understanding the ways that online culture reshapes our sense of self and place can we grasp what now lies beneath. But even as we begin to notice these new linkages, we must be aware that they are not stable, and can break away and recombine as individual icebergs form and melt and the tide rises.

None of this metaphorical shape-shifting undermines the value and need to engage other peoples and cultures, but because most intercultural experience is now filtered, reshaped and recontextualized by tangential online exchanges, these changes must reframe the practice of internationalisation. I suggest that the meaning and value of physical mobility is now largely contained and reshaped by the virtual networks that guide and link us almost no matter where we reside or travel. The internet is almost everywhere, and because of enhanced phone and battery technology, it may be pervasive even where electricity is an undependable commodity.

We now live in a world where physical travel, location and interchange are embedded within the digital space, especially for non-elites for whom other cultures and international travel is largely a topic

they read about and engage with on the internet. And for those of us who are able to travel on a regular basis, whether we are in Amsterdam or São Paulo or Johannesburg may be less important than who we are communicating with online while travelling. ‘Being there’ is still a critically important way to learn, but it is anachronistic and inequitable to view only that experience as determinative.

presence online, where most international interaction now takes place. This is also critical to their future employability, as working in online teams is an increasingly important aspect of many potential careers. And for those students who are physically mobile, integrating and linking COIL exchanges to short-term sojourns gives them the chance to compare the virtual and the embodied.

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## In order to explore the undersea extent of the icebergs, we need to integrate meaningful online engagement into all aspects of internationalisation

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**INTEGRATING ONLINE ENGAGEMENT**

In order to explore the undersea extent of the icebergs, and to thereby better understand the emerging malleability of facts and the development of new cultural bubbles, we need to integrate meaningful online engagement into all aspects of comprehensive internationalisation. COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) virtual exchange is a relatively new term and model for this type of internationalisation activity. COIL has been developed to equitably and bilaterally explore the new cultural landscape of the expanding digital iceberg.

Instead of focusing on physical mobility, COIL seeks to develop interculturally linked classrooms where students work together over the internet to simultaneously learn about each other and their course content, while learning how the internet filters and revises their efforts to communicate. Internationalisation is not just a matter of acquiring knowledge of how students in another country think or act; it is also important to understand how they express their ideas and embody their

To accomplish this goal will require that higher education institutions embed internationalisation more deeply into their classrooms, opening these learning spaces to multiple others through the internet. This means making education truly international, less bound by the local residency of students, and less defined by individual higher education institutions. But it also means reshaping course content to focus on interculturality, to make exchanges more interdisciplinary and more engaged with how the internet is reshaping knowledge and truth. Accomplishing this is not necessarily a skill that most professors or international education managers currently have. So if we wish to help our students better navigate the complex digital diversity we now confront, we must widely embed digital internationalisation models, like COIL virtual exchange and others, and prepare our staff to knowledgeably deploy them.

—JON RUBIN



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# DECODING VIRTUAL MOBILITY

If traditional mobility has been the lynchpin of internationalisation in the analogue past, then virtual mobility may steal centre stage in the digital future. Developments such as the recent COVID-19 outbreak highlight the need for alternative means of facilitating meaningful online interactions across cultures and classrooms – and Collaborative Online International Learning, or COIL, offers a systematic approach to doing exactly that. ▶

The term ‘virtual mobility’ is an odd one. What could possibly be meant by it? In order to answer that question, it is good to reflect briefly on the intended effects of ‘regular’, physical mobility. The broad assumption is that whenever students and/or staff cross national borders in an organised way and for a long enough period of time, positive outcomes in terms of competences, academic and personal development and employability are sure to follow.

#### THE IMPACT OF MOBILITY

The Erasmus+ Impact Study 2019 does show profound impact of Erasmus+ mobility on participating students: there is major self-reported impact on knowledge, skills and attitudes, with 50–90% of participating students stating that the mobility had a positive effect on various competences; the objective outcomes

different situations, contexts and people, and being ‘forced’ to adapt in order to achieve positive outcomes, academic as well as non-academic, *ie* feeling happy and functioning well in the new surroundings.

#### VIRTUAL MOBILITY

Bearing this in mind, it seems logical that virtual mobility activities, offered as an alternative to physical mobility, should be designed in a way to mimic this profound exposure effect. The model of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) has been developed over the last 15 years to do exactly that and to offer similar or better outcomes to physical mobility in terms of improved international and intercultural competences. Typically, the COIL modality is applied to a course or part of a course (‘COIL module’) within a larger degree programme.

- **Online:** the interaction between the students and staff in question takes place online. However, in order to have a successful COIL module, the teaching staff involved should probably meet physically, at least in the preparation phase. During implementation, a model of blended mobility (limited physical interaction combined with longer online interaction) is probably ideal, but excellent COIL modules can also exist strictly online.
- **International:** although COIL-like modules can of course be very useful in a national context (within one country or even within one institution), the goal of COIL as virtual mobility is of course creating meaningful interaction between staff and students in different countries and cultures, leading to the development of international and intercultural competences.
- **Learning:** COIL modules are learning activities, and should be an integral part of the curriculum, not an optional and non-consequential ‘extra’. While grading is probably best done by the home professor, acquisition of academic competences and transferable skills should be an explicit goal, should be monitored and should be included in evaluation and grading.

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## Those who engage in a mobility experience may be those who need it least

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in terms of employability are much less clear from the data. However, differences between Erasmus+ participants and non-mobiles on the one hand are much bigger than differences between Erasmus+ participants pre- and post-mobility on the other, which hints at strong ‘selection bias’ – those who engage in a mobility experience may be those who need it least.

The biggest benefit from mobility seems to be in attitudes, self-confidence, adaptability and ability to cooperate with different kinds of people. This is explained by the effect of being ‘exposed’ to

The COIL acronym contains the essential elements that define virtual mobility. In order to qualify, activities must absolutely meet the strict cumulative conditions of being:

- **Collaborative:** students are put in a position of needing to cooperate with their international peers to produce the required output. They might need to work in mixed teams on assignments, need input, data or feedback from their colleagues. The collaboration is not an ‘extra’ but is an essential condition for success.

Only if a teaching activity fits all four of these characteristics of COIL should they be recognised as constituting virtual mobility. However, if they are met, COIL modules and their activities can take many different forms. Most common and very effective are joint student assignments, in international teams of students, lasting a few weeks to several months.

Various other types of co-teaching and co-learning are possible too, using all kinds of synchronous and asynchronous online communication. The bottom line for both physical mobility and virtual exchange is that improved competences result from meaningful interactions in diverse groups, both online and offline.

it should be qualitatively established and documented that a specific course or module meets the four basic conditions described above. Based on this, a quantitative assessment becomes quite straightforward. Number of students involved, number of credits: how large is the part of the course taken up by the COIL

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## The bottom line for both physical and virtual mobility is that improved competences result from meaningful interactions in diverse groups

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### ENSURING RECOGNITION

The COIL acronym provides a good definition of what constitutes virtual mobility, but how can we make sure it is recognised and valued?

In this context, ‘recognition’ can mean different things: at the student level, how do we make sure the activities undertaken as part of a COIL module are recognised within their curriculum and awarded credits? In this regard, the COIL model can be quite simple: since the COIL module is implemented in constant and intense cooperation between the professors and their respective students, the students can in fact stay under the formal authority of their home professor at all times. There is no need to create a formal ‘joint course’ with shared authority over the entire group, although this is a possibility. The simple solution is that the credits and grades are awarded by the home institution of the student.

At the institutional level or supra-institutional level: how can virtual mobility be recognised, measured, supported and potentially funded? Firstly,

activities in terms of student workload? For example, within a 6 ECTS course, half of the students’ workload is directly related to the COIL activities, *ie* 3 ECTS credits). This calculation could serve as a basis for awarding support at the institutional level and possibly in the framework of funding schemes.

The COIL methodology provides a solid framework for introducing virtual exchange into the core curriculum and giving it proper recognition. By holding our virtual exchange activities to the standards set by COIL – making them collaborative, online, and international learning – we can help university teaching and learning benefit from the best of what digitalisation has to offer.

— PIET VAN HOVE

# TELECONFERENCES IN THE DIGITAL AGE



The financial and environmental costs of international travel are traditionally thought of as the greatest obstacles to traditional student mobility, and recently we have witnessed that pandemic outbreaks can present yet another barrier to in-person contact. With the International Conference of Undergraduate research, Bachelor's students at universities on opposite sides of the globe are embracing virtual mobility as a vehicle for sharing their research far and wide without ever booking a flight.

Traditionally, undergraduate research conferences bring together students from a range of universities in one location to share their knowledge with their peers. Such conferences play an important developmental role for students, providing a space for them to receive feedback and recognition, make connections with research-active peers and see how their own work interacts with a broader research conversation. The events are most commonly held on a local or national level (with exceptions such as the recently-developed World Congress on Undergraduate Research), as the cost of international travel can be prohibitive.

However, the evolution of digital communication technologies has opened up new opportunities to internationalise the undergraduate experience without the significant environmental footprint or financial barriers of international travel. The International Conference of Undergraduate Research (ICUR), established in 2013, is an initiative developed by staff at the University of Warwick in the UK and Monash University in Australia (supported by the Monash Warwick Alliance). It provides students with the opportunity to present their research to an international audience through the use of videoconferencing technology.

# CING

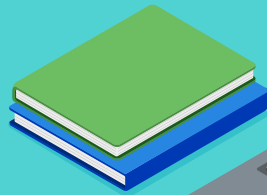


Illustration: Shutterstock

## FINDING CONNECTIONS

From the outset, students from institutions participating in the ICUR are asked to engage with organisers and resources through digital communication technologies. The website introduces students to the ICUR and helps them to understand what presenting at the conference will involve. Videos of previous conferences, statements from student presenters and example materials all show how digital and international interactions may differ from a more standard conference experience. The rigorous abstract submission process challenges students to examine their research through a global lens, to draw out implications that will have impact throughout global research communities and to consider how local and subject-specific issues can translate to an international and interdisciplinary audience.

At the conference itself, taking place over the course of 48 hours each September, students experience virtual mobility through live-streamed video-conference sessions, where they hear the ideas of their global peers. Students present their research in sessions that are themed around different global research priorities – such as the environment and sustainability or health and well-being – and links are made to other participating institutions. Presenters and audience members from all locations are encouraged to find the connecting points between research presentations from different disciplines and different local contexts. They interact in extended Q&A sessions, taking questions that may come from very different ‘places’ in terms of both location and outlook. Through this process, students experience mobility

from the original circumstances in which their research projects were devised.

## CHALLENGING LOGISTICS

The ICUR consists of around 80 conference sessions taking place between 10 or more participating institutions over the course of two days. In the six months between the call for abstracts and the conference itself, more than 500 student researchers and hundreds of other student attendees and volunteers interact with the organisational team behind the event. In devising and executing such a complex event, strong international partnerships between students and staff at Monash and Warwick are essential.

Some of the complexities of organising a large international conference remain the same whether it involves physical travel or purely digital interactions.

The academic calendars of institutions across Asia, Australia, Europe, Africa and the Americas vary considerably, necessitating a fixed date for the event at the end of September. This is the only time suitable for all of the institutions involved in the ICUR, when students are available to present their research simultaneously from each campus location.

These local academic calendars still prove to be a challenge when considering which student cohorts will be in term time, which will have recently graduated and which will have completed research in time for abstract submissions or for the conference itself. For some students, exam preparation or vacation will take priority over research or conference preparation. Digital technologies have helped us to tackle these challenges, allowing students to connect even when, for example, they are travelling to locations far from their university campus.

Mobile digital technologies have also provided us with a mechanism to retain students' interest and confidence in presenting during the long gap between acceptance of their abstract and the conference itself. This gap can encompass exam periods, summer vacation, winter break or even graduation for some students, and can contribute to significant attrition in attendance numbers before the event. Mobile videoconferencing has allowed us to bring students together in preparation groups to meet, discuss, devise and practise their presentations together, across disciplines and nationalities, in the eight weeks prior to the conference. Students can join from home, work, university or other remote locations, keeping them on track and building their confidence despite other commitments and calendar clashes.

#### **ADAPTING TO DIGITAL COMMUNICATION**

A distinctive feature of the ICUR is the collaboration of staff with student directors based in the UK, Singapore and Australia. ICUR student directors work together to deliver the conference at their home institutions. Collectively, student directors are responsible for:

- Developing and implementing an international social media and communications plan to promote the ICUR
- Recruiting a keynote speaker relevant to international, interdisciplinary audiences
- Participating in the rigorous abstract selection and panel scheduling processes
- Coordinating international and local teams of conference volunteers
- Helping to coordinate the conference itself
- Providing strategic input into the future direction of the ICUR from a student perspective

when students are getting to know each other. Student directors learn to overcome these challenges and develop strong team relationships, adapting their communication style to digital and intercultural contexts. The Warwick and Monash staff who organise the event make use of these same digital technologies to coordinate the delivery of the event and all its component programmes, and must navigate the same obstacles and challenges as their student counterparts.

In a world where digital communication competence has come to be expected and great importance is placed on students' gaining intercultural and international experiences and insights, the ICUR points to the future and tackles increasing concerns around the impact of international travel. The logistics involved in developing the ICUR highlight the opportunities and challenges posed by digital internationalisation: aligning academic calendars, technical capabilities and

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### Digital technologies disrupt traditional communication patterns by limiting body language cues and providing fewer opportunities for small talk

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Student directors are exposed to the challenges and opportunities of working in an international team where digital communication technologies are the primary method of engagement. There are significant challenges when developing relationships through the means of digital technologies, particularly when students are doing so for the first time. Digital technologies disrupt traditional communication patterns, particularly by limiting body language cues, and can provide fewer opportunities for small talk

time zones; overcoming communication barriers; and helping students to step out of their comfort zone. All of this requires dedication and imagination.

Yet the use of digital communication technologies has created a unique space for student connection, collaboration and engagement, accessible to all. The rewards will quickly become evident if you speak to any ICUR participant.

— KATE ALDRED & EMMA BARKER

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# EMBRACING DIVERSITY WITH BLENDED LEARNING

The classroom doesn't have to be fully digitised to bring teaching and learning into the digital age. Blended learning projects, like this collaboration between two schools of education in Germany and India, may offer students the best of both worlds, allowing them to brainstorm across borders and apply their new knowledge at home. ▶

In societies and education systems all over the world, learning and teaching have become highly diverse and interconnected as a result of migration, globalisation and digitalisation. Because of this, the development of intercultural competencies is often discussed as one of the most important skills in teacher training, and it can be boosted by collaboration between students in different cultural settings.

Ludwigsburg University of Education in Germany has teamed up with Ambedkar University Delhi in India for

schools of education in India and Germany can act as agents of change in diverse and digitally connected societies. Schools of Education play a major role in developing digital and international strategies, and must be ready to deal with the known challenges in order to prepare students for learning and teaching in new contexts.

Blended learning approaches, mixing face-to-face teaching with electronic and online materials, have proven particularly useful in intercultural and collaborative environments, as they offer tools for communication, interaction and shared

professors teaching in teams are used, a podcast with experts is available, common issues are presented through a selection of pertinent literature, and teams of Indian and German students are set up to develop joint projects. Students are asked to make full use of the collaborative setting by interacting online, using communication tools of their own choice.

In the first summer school, from 30 September to 11 October in Ludwigsburg, eight students and three faculty members from Delhi collaborated as exchange visitors with seven faculty members and 14 students from the host university. The activities focused on developing students' capacities and intercultural understanding on the theme of resilience in education. The students interacted in class sessions at the university and joint projects at home. They also visited German schools in order to get a deeper insight into everyday school life and the connected educational structures and concepts. A second summer school took place in Delhi in March.

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## For many students, managing a full semester abroad as part of their studies is not possible

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a project that aims to develop intercultural competencies among students and teachers. Its central topics are diversity and resilience in the educational systems of India and Germany, but it also aims to address the fact that, for many students, managing a full semester abroad as part of their studies is not possible. The collaboration aims to find a way to provide such students with the opportunity to gain international experience – and learn with and from international partner institutions – without necessarily having to spend a semester in another country.

The project – ‘Schools of education as agents for change: coping with diversity in the digital age’ – is backed by the Baden-Württemberg Stiftung, a foundation that supports innovative collaborations involving the state's universities. The focus is on teacher training and how

learning between students and teachers in different countries. The two partner universities have therefore developed collaborative, interactive and blended learning courses as part of the project, as well as summer schools focusing on the themes of diversity and resilience in educational and social contexts in both countries.

### ENCOURAGING UNDERSTANDING

About half of the course sessions are conducted in classroom settings, with the other half carried out online, individually or in teams consisting of students from India and Germany. The online options are designed to: present course topics from an Indian and German perspective; offer input from proven experts; establish foundations for collaboration; and encourage interaction between Indian and German students. Videos of Indian and German

### CREATING MEANING

The ongoing evaluation of the project uses a multi-method design and has so far focused on the initial stages of the blended courses and the Ludwigsburg summer school. From a quantitative perspective, all students said that they found the collaboration with international peers very helpful and 71% said they appreciated the balance between online and classroom learning. Furthermore, 92% said they appreciated the independence, flexibility and individual pace of learning afforded to them by the blended design.



In a qualitative evaluation report published in October, the benefits of self-regulated learning, interaction and diverse working options are discussed as very positive elements of the project. “When students from two diverse cultures brainstorm together, in concentrated, time-bound sessions towards a single goal, the

their preconceptions and enhance their intercultural understanding.

Blended collaborative learning environments in intercultural settings need a structure that enables students to: find themes and prepare topics individually through online content and tasks; share their perspectives and develop shared

and challenges from a variety of intercultural perspectives and discussing one’s own views in mixed groups, both online and in the classroom, has great learning potential. It is clear that this potential, on a student and an institutional level, is particularly encouraged by the concept of alterity: the state of being ‘other’ or different.

On this topic, Wilhelm von Humboldt once said: “Our encounters with the world are transformative in that they are mediated by ‘self-alienation’, that is, alienation from our taken-for-granted and habitual self-understandings. [...] *Bildung* refers to the active and receptive self-other relation implicit in educational processes.”

Humboldt’s idea of alienation from one’s own world as a constructive means

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## The evaluation shows that real, authentic and meaningful interaction via short-term programmes is highly appreciated

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process serves as an engine for a creation of meaning that is composite yet nuanced, a complexity of ideas that would perhaps be missing if the source came from a single context,” it says.

In general, the participating students were positive about the blended learning design of the courses: in particular, the mix of digital learning and classroom discussion, as well as the structure of the courses. The findings indicate that students valued the collaborative and interactive approach of the courses and summer school, and that they felt challenged to develop their learning skills and acquire new learning techniques. Finally, the evaluation shows that real, authentic and meaningful interaction via short-term programmes is highly appreciated.

### SELF-ALIENATION

Looking beyond the project at the bigger picture, blended collaborative learning appears to be a medium through which students and teachers can shed

knowledge through collaboration in class and online; develop new content and tasks for themselves and others; and meet face to face.

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## Blended collaborative learning is a medium through which students and teachers can shed their preconceptions and enhance their intercultural understanding

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The discussion of topics that are relevant to all partners in an intercultural setting offers great learning potential. In this context, blended learning and intercultural collaboration can function as links between students from different countries and sociocultural backgrounds. At the same time, such learning scenarios can connect education systems in different countries, enabling them to share experiences, perspectives and concepts. Looking at similar questions

of learning can be described as a key element of the project. As a result, the design of our cooperative project has sparked a new discussion of curriculum development in both universities.

— CHRISTOPH KNOBLAUCH,  
JÖRG-U. KESSLER & NINA JÄGER

# TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SKILLS FOR STAFF

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While digitalisation of higher education seems inevitable, the development of digital literacy among staff is decidedly not. A sharp digital strategy and state-of-the-art equipment won't get your institution very far if staff isn't equipped to work with it – but what's the best way to get educators and administrators up to speed?

**D**igital transformation has become a megatrend in higher education, where universities are competing globally for students, academics and research prestige. University customers are more tech-savvy and vocal than ever, and the traditional university model has had to dramatically adapt to meet new demands and stay relevant in the digital age. Innovative strategies have affected all areas: administration and infrastructure, learning and assessment, research and learning materials, student recruitment, and interactions with society and businesses.

At Nottingham Trent University (NTU), we consider the key to a successful strategy to be high-quality data. Data is the fundament we base our decisions on, and because of this we must ensure we capture it, store it and use it effectively. Data informs us of our students' needs, performance and satisfaction, and it helps us to monitor competitors,

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In order to cope in this fast-changing era of technology, it is imperative that universities ensure all their staff and students are digitally literate

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keep an account of partners and track potential applicants. While data has been and still can be hard to interpret, mainly due to inconsistency in the ways it is captured across different departments even within the same institution, an array of innovative digital solutions are promising to resolve this issue. Most of these essentially offer the same thing: centralised data, immediately accessible across departments.

However, reaping the benefits of such solutions necessitates not only procurement of a data capture tool but also extensive implementation and staff training on this tool. In order to cope in this fast-changing era of technology, it is imperative that universities ensure all their staff and students are digitally literate. While it is the duty of a procurement team to upgrade or buy IT tools and that of the IT department to implement these in the university's digital network, dedicated user training is required for a smooth transition to new or updated technology.

#### **USER-FRIENDLY?**

The 'user-friendly' tag that is put on certain digital solutions is hardly reliable, as it can have different meanings to different people. As such, the first impediment stems from variable digital skill sets across university departments and staff. The easiest and most common assumption is that everyone is digitally illiterate to start with, so that everybody is being trained from the same level. However, this is an inefficient way to approach training: there are certain prerequisites that might not even be met at ground zero, and there could be a lack of interest in lengthy basic training on the side of the more digitally literate staff.

On the other hand, a top-down approach assuming a standard knowledge base is unlikely to meet the needs of all parties. From the perspective of a digitally literate employee, it is easy to assume that everybody possesses certain technical skills, such as being able to create pivot tables in Excel. In fact, we've found that a substantial number of staff lack such skills, which is significant because they provide a fundamental understanding of the logic behind more advanced, 'user-friendly' systems.

Rolling out advanced systems and forcing advanced training on end users who lack fundamental digital skills is counterproductive. Workloads increase as end users struggle with the new systems and are forced to duplicate work by relying on old methods to complete their day-to-day tasks. When systems are not used for their intended purpose, inconsistent or incorrect data and frustrated staff members are the outcome, affecting not only the individual but also the department and university as a whole.

Hence, a bottom-up approach is preferable: an approach that considers everyone's digital training needs – those of the team, the department and so on – until those can be matched to the overall needs of the university.

#### UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

About three years ago, NTU procured a digital solution for the capture of data on studying abroad and international partnerships. This was rolled out across departments and has allowed us to connect to our central Student Information System and easily export data to other internal or external data systems when needed.

More than 30 members of staff had to replace administrative practices that had been in place for decades with a brand-new digital system. While NTU Global managed the implementation of the tool, the IT department managed the technical side and provided user training guides. Two years later, less than 50% of the staff members the platform was rolled out to were comfortable using it, despite having received training and guidance.

And even though guides were created, roughly 57% of students found the system difficult to handle or needed

support to use it. This is probably our most eye-opening finding. If students born and raised in the past two decades find it difficult to use this system despite being versed in myriad technological tools such as smartphones, tablets and computers and trained in a variety of apps, how can we expect staff who have often had fewer interactions with tech tools to absorb such new developments at such a fast pace?

The answer is that we should not. Instead of expecting that staff will eventually adapt to the systems by simply using them for a long time and learning on their own, which seems to be

Although it was a difficult issue to tackle, we managed to get on the right track and developed a bottom-up approach to address the needs of all staff who required additional digital training.

Our first action entailed personalised tutoring for individuals or small teams, where we addressed training needs. Rather than asking individuals to comply with our needs, we asked them how we could support them with theirs. Our second action consisted of a bimonthly cross-departmental support forum where we addressed a variety of issues in the study abroad area, including digital literacy. Our third and most recent

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## If students born and raised in the past two decades find it difficult to use the system, how can we expect staff to absorb it at such a fast pace?

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a common expectation, we should instead allocate resources to meet their digital literacy needs. Such resources should go beyond standard training guides that assume everybody has the same level of knowledge and beyond online training videos, which are a great addition to a training curriculum but not sufficient on their own.

#### PERSONALISED SUPPORT

With more than 10m e-resources downloaded by our students in the past year, NTU is in the top 10% of UK universities using e-libraries. Still, the number of students coming through the doors of our libraries has doubled in the past 12 months. This indicates that our students' needs are far from being fulfilled by technology alone. This is also valid for our staff.

action consists of digital-focused monthly cross-departmental user group meetings that reconcile our multi-departmental digital skills needs with the wider university's digital strategy of achieving a single source of truth for all the various data systems it uses.

We still have work to do to completely reconcile everyone's needs, but we are certainly one step closer. There is no doubt that higher education will continue to become more and more digitalised; the question we should be addressing is whether all staff will be able to keep up with this digitalisation, and how we can enable them to do so.

— CATO ROLEA



# DIGITAL CREDENTIALS

## EASING THE TRANSITION

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The transformation of academic records from paper-based to digital documents is nothing new. What is new, however, is the surge in the number of universities, organisations and initiatives that are developing different technologies to manage digital credentials. ▶

The growth in electronic document sources and technologies is not only reshaping notions of credential authenticity, ownership and content but is also playing its part in the global movement of students across borders and between institutions. With their transcripts and certificates just one click away in their digital wallets and cloud platforms, students can showcase their qualifications whenever and wherever they need to.

It is estimated that more than 5 million students today pursue higher education outside their home country. One of the primary goals of the recently adopted UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education is to improve student mobility and access to higher education between regions and continents. The convention gives international students the right to have their qualifications from abroad assessed in a fair, transparent and non-discriminatory manner.<sup>1</sup> Digital academic records are an important tool to facilitate this, with electronic transcripts and diplomas becoming increasingly common. The China Higher Education Student Information and Career Center, one of the first to introduce a digital student database, has registered 117m qualifications so far and grows by 10m qualifications a year.<sup>2</sup> My eQuals, a digital credentials platform for Australia and New Zealand, stores more than 500,000 documents.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE BENEFITS

For students, digital documents offer a sense of control and agency over their credentials. Instead of having to contact a registrar to request a transcript, they

can now access their credentials directly through their online accounts. They can easily display their certificates and transcripts on electronic devices, attach them as part of an online application or share them through a secure link. This direct access to one's own credentials is not only empowering but also saves money and time, easing students' transitions from one institution to another.

a more comprehensive insight into students' achievements by including not only their record of coursework and grades but also skills developed in the course of study, extracurricular activities, prizes and voluntary work.<sup>5</sup> A similar initiative is being undertaken at North American colleges and universities. The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers and the National

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### This direct access to one's own credentials is not only empowering but also saves money and time, easing students' transitions from one institution to another

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For institutions and employers, digital academic records offer greater convenience and security, leading to more efficient processing. Electronic documents reach recipients almost immediately, can be protected with tamper-proof technology and can be stored in digital databases. To provide easier recognition and verification of qualifications across the European Union, the European Commission is implementing the Europass Technical Framework for Digitally Signed Credentials. This will offer an interoperable, fraud-resistant system that is compliant with the General Data Protection Regulation and can be understood by education providers and employers across all member states.<sup>4</sup>

Digital credentials also have the potential to redefine the content and layout of traditional academic records. The Higher Education Achievement Report is an example of a reinvented, enhanced transcript that is being used across institutions in the UK. It provides

Association of Student Affairs Professionals are developing a Comprehensive Learner Record that would, in addition to the information contained in a traditional transcript, record the experience that students accumulate outside the classroom.<sup>6</sup> This exhaustive transcript format, which stacks macro and micro credentials together with the competencies attained, can streamline university admissions and employers' background checks by providing better matches to the educational programme or job.

#### THE CHALLENGES

Of course, it is not all plain sailing: there are challenges and risks posed by electronic documents, and these must be properly accounted for in order to reap the full benefits. Efficient implementation of portable digital student data requires secure and reliable technology, the costs of which can be a problem, particularly in developing countries. Digital databases

require continuous scrutiny of received documents in order to ensure their trustworthiness. Databases can be compromised, and IT departments need to work together with credential evaluators to develop a set of skills for ensuring not only document authenticity but also privacy of shared data.

And although electronic academic records could particularly benefit refugees or students from countries with high levels of credential fraud, in reality they are mainly used in countries that are not particularly affected by these issues, such as Australia, China, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States.

#### EVOLUTION OF EVALUATION

World Education Services, a not-for-profit social enterprise in Canada and the United States, has witnessed first-hand the impact of digitalisation. As recently as 2017, applicants used only a few electronic

in a digital database. This significantly shortens the time needed for credential evaluation and eases the process of applying for university courses, jobs or immigration.

Another time-consuming process within credential evaluation is the authentication and verification of documents. To verify paper-based credentials that appear inauthentic, World Education Services communicates with the document's issuing institution. Depending on the institution, that process of verification can take anywhere from a couple of days to a few months. Digital documents, on the other hand, are instantly verifiable when secure integrations and transmission procedures are established. The most common electronic document format that we receive is a digitally signed and certified PDF. The issuer and integrity of such documents can be immediately validated in Adobe Reader, which makes authentication significantly more efficient and secure.

undeniable. It is safe to say that IT infrastructure in different parts of the world and between institutions varies greatly, so getting institutions on board globally will happen inconsistently and over time – but the trend is towards a digital future. Credential evaluators would be wise to get started on setting up procedures and processes to deal with digital documents as overall capability grows.

— DRAGANA DILAS

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## The two greatest advantages of electronically received documents are shorter processing times and improved fraud prevention

sources to send their documents to us; today, the number of vetted universities or third-party providers that send their documents to us electronically exceeds 50.

From the perspective of credential evaluation, the two greatest advantages of electronically received documents are shorter processing times and improved fraud prevention. Unlike paper-based credentials, which need to be converted from analogue to digital format, electronic documents can be readily saved

The criteria for securing, accepting, examining and evaluating electronic documents are evolving together with the documents themselves, and the lack of standardised procedures can cause occasional setbacks and delays in the process of evaluation. Yet despite all the challenges, there is a great deal of promise in digitalised academic records. Their potential to expedite the credential recognition process and enhance the information conveyed through transcripts is

IN CONVERSATION WITH

# DOMINIC ORR

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JACOB GIBBONS  
EAIE

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In addition to serving as Adjunct Professor of Education Management at Nova Gorica University in Slovenia, Dominic Orr is also Research Lead at Kiron Open Higher Education, a free online learning platform geared towards refugees and other underserved communities. Having been intimately involved with the Bologna Process from the start, Prof Orr takes the long view on the ways in which digital technology are transforming higher education and mobility.

**You were co-author of a white paper entitled 'Bologna Digital 2020' in May of 2019. What was the key driver behind this report and how has the paper been received, both within the higher education community and at a policy level?**

**DO:** Digitalisation is everywhere, but because of that, people aren't sure what it actually means for higher education. So some of us who had been involved in the Bologna process for many years realised that we needed to better explain how digitalisation can contribute to the classic goals of the Bologna process, one of which is of course student mobility. What we tried to do in the white paper was to make it clearer what contribution digitalisation can make, but also to remind everyone that digitalisation is not a goal in itself: it's about harnessing digitalisation to achieve the goals we've been pursuing all this time.

We really believed that the reason people get either overexcited or nervous about digitalisation is because they see it as a separate thing. So our whole idea was to try to make it less scary and explain how it fits into the things we're dealing with every day.

In essence, we're arguing for the fact that digital should be used integratively within teaching and learning, within the entire higher education enterprise.

We noticed that universities appreciated the approach we took in the white paper, but in particular policymakers found this very helpful because many of them had already started designing digitalisation strategies, but I think many of them felt they didn't know what the end purpose was. So we have found in many countries that the white paper has been accepted as something really quite helpful just giving a kind of framework to think about how to move forward.

**Will digitalisation allow for new opportunities in international higher education which we have not yet envisaged? Are there unforeseen risks or threats?**

**DO:** I'm currently writing a thematic paper about digitalisation and it's led me back to some papers from about 20 years ago, and many of those papers you could have written today. So clearly, although





we get excited about this, we're not really *using* digitalisation. Part of this maybe is because we're not really seeing it in its whole context: digitalisation can make internationalisation more inclusive, but we have to make sure that certain risks or certain barriers are mitigated.

We can only become inclusive if the learning environment is also pedagogically reconsidered. This was recently illustrated by a case of two universities working together in 'virtual teams', a Spanish university doing an exchange with a university in South Korea.

**We're having this conversation as the COVID-19 pandemic makes its way across Europe, forcing many in higher education and other sectors to switch to video conferencing and digital delivery of teaching and learning activities. Do you think the coronavirus and the current restrictions on movement and in-person contact will affect the course of digitalisation within higher education in the longer term?**

do: I hope so. Certainly most universities and colleges across the world are currently joining what is being

the current issues and have a view to a better and more inclusive future of higher education, so I think there is reason to be optimistic.

**What transformations do you envisage in teaching and learning in higher education thanks to the digital revolution?**

do: My hope is that in ten years, we won't be thinking in this very limited way that digitalisation means that everyone's got a tablet or there's a smartboard in the classroom, or that we have to *see* the technology for it to be having some kind of impact. Going forward, it's going to be much more about us understanding *how* digitalisation is extending and broadening the learning environment. Part of that has already happened for the learners: there is no learner anywhere in the world who's only learning in the classroom, who's only learning through physical contact with people. They're already using digital tools, but we're not really harnessing it within teaching and learning activities.

We're going to need to be thinking much more than we've been able to before about the student being in the

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## Digitalisation can make internationalisation more inclusive, but we have to make sure that certain risks or certain barriers are mitigated

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They had this idea that they could create virtual teams and enable the students to work together, but they never really thought about whether the students and teachers really had the kind of digital literacy you need to carry this idea through. They never thought about the fact that if you're using digitalisation in that way, you're creating a new learning space.

The greatest risk is that of extremely low impact, and this will be the case unless you reconsider pedagogy and reconsider what people need to be able to actually act within this new space. That's the reason that we can look back at papers published twenty years ago and see that in many cases we've made little progress: it's because we didn't go back to these key questions.

called 'the great online experiment'. At present, however, COVID-19 is largely being seen as a problem of access to content. But content does not equate to 'higher education'. We should learn from the first wave of MOOCs that our focus should be on creating a high-quality learning experience based on interaction

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## There is no learner anywhere in the world who's only learning in the classroom, who's only learning through physical contact with people

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and exchange. This requires space and courage to experiment, even now. Many people are both working hard to solve

centre of the learning process. We've had student-centred learning as a topic for at least the last ten years, but it's always

difficult to organise because we're thinking of it in a classroom setting where in reality the lecturer is very much determining what's happening. An interesting alternative example is co-creation of the course, where students don't just do an assignment which is then used to test what they've learned, but instead they do an assignment that has constructive value for the social enterprise side of the university. Another is peer assessment, where your student colleagues are assessing you instead of just the teacher.

**You are a dual citizen of Britain and Germany, hold a PhD from a German university and now work for a university in Slovenia. How did your highly internationalised career lead you to an interest in digitalisation in higher education?**

DO: There's no way I could have these rich relationships with people all over the world if not through digitalisation. It's very easy for me to feel British and German, and I love the idea of having this small professorship now in Slovenia, because it's about five and a half hours' drive from where I live now, which means crossing borders. I've noticed that digitalisation is helping me to cross borders like this, without always actually traveling so much. I've still got a fascination with this thing where you go to another country and see – *wow*, all the topics are completely the same. Last autumn I was in Cotonou, Benin, talking about digitalisation and learning, but I could have just as easily been in Cologne; the topics were the same. It's about teachers and learners adopting a 'digital mindset' and



Dominic Orr speaking at Open Education Global Conference 2019

harnessing the digital opportunities, and of course about the affordability and quality of internet connectivity.

One of the major things I've been working on for the past fifteen years or so is how to try and make higher education more inclusive. I spent ten years running

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**Looking at digital higher education brings you right back to that age-old question: what is higher education?**

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a big study called 'EUROSTUDENT' on what kinds of measures universities could be taking to help them become more inclusive. A lot of what we found was that

many of the efforts being made were just too small and not about changing how we think about higher education.

I'm really finding at the moment that looking at digital higher education brings you right back to that age-old question: what *is* higher education? This is the question we should start from for any kind of reform initiative. But I'm optimistic: we can do better in higher education, and digitalisation will help us.

# DATA BREACHES

# UNDERSTANDING

# THE THREAT

Digitalisation brings with it a suite of new opportunities for higher education, but with every blessing comes a curse. The decentralised and digitally opened-up university environment is particularly vulnerable to hackers seeking valuable student data – and it's up to universities to ensure the safety of students, staff and their data.

While the wheel revolutionised travel and the transport of goods, and electricity laid the groundwork for countless technological advancements, neither of these innovations, nor any other, has directly changed the fabric of human interaction to the degree that digitalisation has. In the context of international higher education, it is clear to see that digital technology brings both benefits and dangers. While the benefits are numerous and often discussed, I would like to focus on a darker aspect of digitalisation: unauthorised information transmission from systems, or data breaches.

Around the world we are seeing increases in cybercrime, with theft of data among the most common varieties. Universities hold a treasure trove of personal information about their students, faculty and staff – and the data on students tends to include substantial information about parents or guardians, so family data can be leaked as well. In almost all cases, databases contain basic information such as names, addresses, email addresses and phone numbers, but they can also include personal identification numbers, credit card numbers and bank details. One student's data has the potential to harm multiple individuals, which compounds universities' responsibility to handle that data safely. But how well are they managing this?

#### PRIZE DATA

It is fair to say that it depends on the institution, but, generally speaking, universities have a somewhat unfavourable reputation for data security.



Photo: Shutterstock

They are known for their open-access culture, multiple remote server access points and decentralisation – all of which are cybersecurity risks. They have therefore become prime targets for cyberattacks,

because it may give them the opportunity to collect information on those students for the rest of their lives. It is therefore not surprising that in 2018 alone, 200 institutions in the UK recorded more than

## In 2018 alone, 200 institutions in the UK recorded more than 1000 attempts to steal data or disrupt their digital services

particularly since the data universities hold is among the most valuable currency on the dark web, the home of most online criminal activity.

Kevin Gosschalk, the co-founder and chief executive of Arkose Labs, an international cybersecurity firm that works to stop online fraud, says that personal information on university-aged students is particularly prized by cybercriminals

1000 attempts to steal data or disrupt their digital services, and these numbers are likely to have risen significantly in 2019. Unfortunately, many of these attempts were successful.

### HOLISTIC APPROACH

Protecting personal data is not just the responsibility of the IT department at our universities – it is the responsibility

of the university community as a whole. That means that cybersecurity should be on the executive-level agenda of every institution; just as institutional leaders are regularly engaged in strategic planning, fundraising, and alumni and trustee relations, they should be engaged in promoting cybersecurity.

There should be some form of data protection officer who serves on the president's cabinet or at least has easy access to those who do. These officers need the authority to implement security controls; otherwise, it is difficult for safeguards to be put in place. And those safeguards should include both system protections and education initiatives for staff, faculty and students in order to build better organisational awareness and breach responsiveness.

This summary of data protection considerations may seem abstract and perhaps unrelated to the day-to-day work of most of us in international education. However, I would argue that it is very relevant to our jobs. When we work with student mobility, we have the responsibility to ensure student safety to the best of our abilities, which includes keeping their personal data safe. Whether we are welcoming international students to our programmes or sending our students to partner universities, we need to proactively do our part to protect student data from breaches.

### DIFFERENT STANDARDS

Europe has long been the leader in data protection, and its General Data Protection Regulation has been the model on which other countries have based their own.

However, many countries still do not have formal regulations, and levels of accountability differ. For example, Japan has implemented the Act on the Protection of Personal Information; however, former cybersecurity minister Yoshitaka Sakurada

remind us that we should be doing the same. Some basic questions to consider using for this dialogue include:

- Is the requested student information necessary? Is there a clear purpose? If not, the data should not be provided.

- Has the institution previously experienced cybersecurity issues? If yes, what precautions have been put in place to prevent future incidents?

Of course, these are just examples. There are many other questions that can be asked, but the takeaway is that cyber threats employing increasingly sophisticated techniques surround us, and we should all proactively learn about the cybersecurity of our partner universities and our own institutions. Having expectations of each other can raise awareness and push us towards building more robust protection. It is our responsibility to prepare for cyberattacks, because the reality of today is that it is not *if* we will experience an attack but *when*. Working together with our partners, we can create a stronger culture of accountability and, in turn, more secure defences to keep our students' data safe.

—JUANITA HEIGHAM

## The reality of today is that it is not *if* we will experience an attack, but *when*

publicly admitted in 2018 to never having used a computer and not knowing what a USB was.

Astonishing as this may seem to some of us, it is not that surprising in Japan, because cybersecurity has not been an issue of serious consideration until very recently. Companies do not typically have cybersecurity officers and it is even less common for universities to have them. Thus, it is unlikely that student data in Japan is as safe as it is in Europe. We should acknowledge the fact that safety varies from country to country and from institution to institution.

### MUTUAL SUPPORT


It is easy for us to turn a blind eye to things not directly affecting our daily routines, but a data breach is serious: it can cause significant financial loss, damage a university's reputation and disrupt how an institution functions.

So what can practitioners in international higher education do? A simple step is to support each other by holding ourselves and our partner universities to account and asking questions about data security. Basic questions can remind our partners to advocate ongoing cybersecurity development at their institutions and

- What happens to students' data when they finish a programme? Is it kept? If so, why, for how long, and in what manner?
- Is there a data protection officer who oversees cybersecurity? If so, who is it? If not, who is responsible for taking action if a data breach occurs?
- What is the protocol after a data breach? What can students expect to be done and how will they be supported?



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# THE DIGITAL DISCONNECT FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

Digitalisation is widely seen as opening doors and making higher education more accessible, and often this is the case. However, the impact of digitalisation on disadvantaged student populations isn't so straightforward. As the digital era marches on, higher education institutions need to critically evaluate their assumptions about the ways students engage with technology and education. ▶

In today's world, 'digitalisation' is a synonym for 'progress'. It makes higher education more efficient, more transparent, more affordable, more tailored, more accessible and more flexible. This applies to administration (such as admission and recognition procedures) as well as to teaching (such as online and blended learning). While the advantages surely outweigh any drawbacks, all this innovation can have some unintended consequences. In particular, how can digitalisation affect the position of some of our most vulnerable (potential) students?

#### **ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESSES**

In general, I am a firm believer in digitalisation and I see the huge benefits it can bring for all students. For example, it makes recognition of prior qualifications smoother and more flexible through innovative systems such as Open Badges.

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### Many processes rely on access to an actual computer: completing online forms and uploading files often does not work from mobile phones

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It allows for competences acquired in informal learning to be recognised more easily, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds will certainly benefit from this. Paperless admissions processes can be a huge benefit for people in difficult circumstances as well. However, I believe we must keep our eyes open to

the fact that digitalisation can introduce new obstacles for some.

Vulnerable students don't always live in a world where access to digital tools is easy. Participating in the digital revolution, at least in the way often expected of students in higher education, can be a distant dream for them. In a small survey I conducted among a group of displaced Syrian students in Turkey, I found that while 94% of them had a mobile device (phone or tablet) with internet access, only 35% of them reported having access to a computer. This is a problem given that many processes rely on having access to an actual computer: completing online forms and uploading files often does not work from mobile phones. For vulnerable students, especially in the phase when they are still trying to apply for scholarships and enrol at a university, not yet having access to computers in libraries and computer labs is an issue. Universities should

take this into account and make smartphone apps available for their admission procedures.

#### **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

For most students, digitalisation in the teaching and learning process will bring great benefits: online and blended

learning give them additional choices and much more flexibility, without any real downsides. Of course, online and blended learning have very positive sides for vulnerable students as well. In some situations, these innovations can be crucial to allowing disadvantaged students to participate in higher education in the first place. Online and blended learning will make it easier to combine studies with other responsibilities such as jobs and family, since students have more freedom in organising their own time.

However, online learning environments can come with some drawbacks. The social process of learning is key in bringing disadvantaged students the 'soft skills' they will need so badly for success in later life. Even more important than technical knowledge and skills (which soon become outdated anyway), these soft skills – such as flexibility, self-confidence, team collaboration and effective oral and written communication – depend on co-learning with peers. For many students, this is less essential because they have been and will be in plenty of social settings where they can bond and co-learn with peers in formal and informal ways. For vulnerable students, the classroom can be their only chance at forming links with fellow students and learning how to fit into student life and, later, professional life.

In this sense, the large-scale transition to online courses takes away crucial learning and socialisation opportunities. If we want higher education to play its role as a major force for social cohesion and providing opportunities for all,



the importance of the social aspect of learning – formal and informal, curricular and extracurricular – should never be underestimated. A well-balanced blended programme will be the ideal solution: offering plenty of flexibility but still ensuring enough opportunities for interaction between students and with professors.

Digitalisation does mean progress. It brings benefits for all students. It opens doors and can bring hope to those people who need it most. But whenever new steps in the digitalisation process are envisaged, care should be taken to assess the impact they will have on various groups of (potential) students. Do they risk creating additional obstacles for some?

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## The large-scale transition to online courses takes away crucial learning and socialisation opportunities

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### FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE

It would be interesting to know more about student success rates in online courses, whether as a full degree or not, as well as the recognition rate of the qualifications obtained online for further studies or job placements. We need an evidence-based discussion of these topics, so real data and statistics are crucial. This is the only way to develop programmes that are accessible and achievable for vulnerable target groups while making sure the time and effort they put in will not be wasted.

Entering the third decade of the 21st century, we are all in favour of digitalisation, in either a narrow or a broad sense. However, we shouldn't be blindfolded or complacent; we need to search for the right implementation for the right contexts and target groups. That's how we can be innovative and serve society's actual needs.

Will they have unintended effects, widening the gap between privileged and disadvantaged students instead of closing it? These questions can only be answered by taking a step back and placing ourselves in the shoes of students from different backgrounds. Digital processes and environments should be introduced in a balanced way, and alternative options should always be given to students who want or need them.

— CEREN GENÇ

# LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY FOR INCLUSIVE INTERNATIONALISATION

Digital technology is often seen as a threat to privacy, but this doesn't always have to be the case. The anonymity of digital communication can help create a safe space for students belonging to socially stigmatised groups by allowing them to access identity-specific resources without forcing them to announce that identity to the world.

Alerts, rings, and pop-up messages constantly steal our attention as life's tempo increases around the world. Accessing information is no longer a challenge, thanks to the faithful friends found in our pockets and pocketbooks that can rapidly research information, answer questions, and enable us to instantly communicate with one another across the globe.

Sure, there is the inevitable challenge of wading through the flood of information available around the clock and determining accuracy and reliability, but digitalisation offers significant benefits to universities in the USA and elsewhere. While it has undoubtedly increased the efficiency of disseminating international mobility information, great potential remains untapped: digitalisation can also play a significant role in delivering sensitive, identity-specific resources to marginalised groups and creating the necessary space to further diverse and inclusive internationalisation efforts.

#### **PRESERVING PRIVACY**

Students may not feel comfortable disclosing to administrators and academics that they are first-generation university students, low-income students, students in the LGBTQ+ community, students with disabilities *etc.* By digitalising resources on international mobility offices' websites and online platforms, universities can allow students to privately access what they may need without having to ask for it and/or self-disclose their identities in the process.



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gender and sexuality, religion, health and ability etc for a variety of countries. University administrators should highlight these resources and where they can be accessed online in an advising session or pre-departure orientation for every student. This way, students can then know where to privately access information specific to their unique identities.

#### IMPACT ON STAFF

Digitalisation, however, does not only benefit students. The international education teams managing programmes and advising students must be well-equipped for a variety of evolving questions, concerns, and challenges. Through advancements in technology, these staff and faculty members can now rapidly provide online resources to students. Additionally, they can connect prospective study abroad students with past participants and alumni for digital communication, fostering the exchange of information and recommendations.

While these digital tools are readily available, institutions may find that their administrative staff are not fully trained in the resources and technologies. With all of the benefits of digitalisation, it becomes clear that university leadership must emphasise the need for greater training in order to fully utilise these digital tools and better equip mobility advising teams with stronger, pertinent resources for *all* student populations.

#### DEVELOPING DIGITAL RESOURCES

One exciting idea that some USA universities are implementing for outbound mobility is the development and electronic

For many students in the USA, advising has shifted to a student-driven approach. Materials and communications have moved online so students can access resources remotely and complete pre-departure activities and processes on their

privately. This practice of providing digital resources publicly protects students from unnecessarily – or even forcibly – needing to disclose their private identity or identities. These digital resources range from online lists of programme

## Providing digital resources publicly protects students from unnecessarily – and even forcibly – needing to disclose their private identities

own timelines, from within the comfort of their own homes. The sense of privacy that comes with digitalisation is essential for fostering inclusive access to resources.

Many universities are now leveraging digitalisation to achieve greater transparency in inclusive materials and other information students can consume

alumni that can be contacted for specific questions, to host country organisations' websites that provide identity-specific resources to various affinity groups.

For example, IES Abroad offers comprehensive country-specific diversity resources on their website, with information on topics like race and ethnicity,

dissemination of identity-based resources through international offices' websites. Advisers can point out the webpage(s) with a listing of resources so students know where to find the information and select what they personally need. It is important for these resources to be easily accessible in private, though, so students can choose what information they need based on their specific identities that they may not publicly wish to share.

This is especially critical for LGBTQ+ students, including many who may not be out publicly to their peers and communities but still need specific resources — perhaps even more so than their peers who are out. As a result, it is essential for advisors to direct students to where they can read information on their own and determine what they need based on the identity or identities with which they personally identify. By placing all of the resources publicly on office websites, universities can offer a comprehensive listing of study abroad resources for all identities. The power of privacy and anonymity that comes with this type of information sharing is only made possible by global digitalisation.

Another great example of how digitalisation is building a more inclusive experience in international education is through the use of electronic polling applications and software in classroom discussions and pre-departure orientations. The anonymity provided by live polling applications empowers students to ask vulnerable questions confidentially from behind the safety of their screens. They can acknowledge concerns and voice sensitive questions in real-time without having to identify themselves publicly to their peers.

#### **DIGITALISATION POST-DEPARTURE**

The pre-departure stage is only one area, however, in which digitisation is improving the international education landscape. Once students are on the ground there are still great benefits to the rapid access to information made possible by smartphones and other electronic devices. If a student

the ground, due to students' ease of access and inability to fully disconnect, the digitalisation of pre-departure materials and identity resources can greatly aid in preparing students for their global experiences. International professionals are divided, and there is often heated debate between those encouraging students

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### Digitalisation of pre-departure materials and identity resources can greatly aid in preparing students for their global experiences

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is in a pinch to find a specific in-country resource for a certain minority or affinity group with which they identify, they can simply get out their device and quickly access information about what's available locally. What's more, students identifying with certain minority and affinity groups may find benefits in country-specific apps while abroad that can quickly connect them to those groups within their local communities.

While some critics may argue that digitalisation has eroded the authenticity of the international experience once on

to disconnect and enjoy the experience abroad and others praising being plugged in so students have the ability to privately access potentially life-saving information and resources.

Regardless of the side you choose in this debate, critics and proponents of digitalisation would agree that what's important is achieving a conscious balance of living a disconnected experience while also leveraging the opportunities for privacy that are inherent in our growing digital world.

—WILLIAM BONFIGLIO



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# DISTANCE LEARNING FOR THE DEVELOPING WORLD

For the many rural communities in Nepal that struggle to access quality education, open and distance learning programmes are a blessing. In this collaboration between two Finnish institutions and one Nepali faculty of education, digital technology has helped facilitate intercultural knowledge on multiple levels. ▶



In Nepal, as in many developing countries, the human rights of women, minority ethnic groups and people living in remote and rural areas are challenged by a lack of access to education. From 2017 to 2020, our institutions in Finland – Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences and Häme University of Applied Sciences – carried out a project aimed at improving access to higher education for these groups. The Teacher Preparation Programme, or TPP Nepal, involved developing the delivery of open and distance learning (ODL) at Tribhuvan University. It also focused on student-centred education and the role of guidance and counselling in supporting students and helping them to obtain a degree.

The TPP Nepal project was a continuation of an earlier venture, known as Training of Trainers for the Teacher Qualification Upgrading Programme in Nepal, which we carried out from 2012 to 2015 in cooperation with Tribhuvan University. At the time of that earlier project, the Faculty of Education at Tribhuvan, Nepal's largest higher education provider, was unfamiliar with the blended learning model and the basics of ODL. While the project was successful in developing understanding and knowledge among the participants, the results were restricted to three main subjects: Nepali language education, health education, and curriculum and evaluation.

The 2017–2020 project was therefore set up to meet the development needs still faced by Tribhuvan. Seven campuses in disparate regions around the country were involved in the project, all of which needed to improve their ODL delivery

and cooperation to meet modern standards of education. Teachers needed to upgrade their ICT (information and communication technology) skills and their understanding of pedagogy and distance education, while campuses needed to improve their ICT environments.

#### AIMS AND METHODS

The TPP Nepal project provided practical development support at the regional campuses, including pedagogical training in distance education and in modern approaches to student-centred education, as well as understanding of the role of guidance and counselling in student graduation rates and overall learning performance. The specific outcome statement in the project plan was: “[Tribhuvan’s Faculty of Education] has achieved a capacity to independently deliver and develop ODL as a means of increasing access to and quality of teacher education throughout the country.”

The activities to reach this outcome were manifold. A baseline SWOT analysis was carried out at the regional campuses, which resulted in a learning needs assessment for ODL coordinators and tutors, ICT experts, library staff, campus chiefs and master trainers. Regional analyses were also carried out to discover the ODL potential at each campus, especially concerning the participation of minorities and women in education. The infrastructural limitations and possibilities were very different at each campus, with mountainous areas having few or no transport possibilities and bad or non-existent data connections and ICT equipment.

#### DIFFERENT NEEDS IN DIFFERENT REGIONS

Because of the vastly different development needs at each campus, the practical training and support programme was carried out with the help of regional visits by trainers from our two Finnish universities. Campus staff were trained and supported in organising their own training sessions for their teachers. At most campuses, this training focused on basic ICT skills and use of the Moodle learning platform, while at others the teachers already possessed these basic skills and the training could focus more on ODL pedagogy and guidance.

The training and support programme was designed to meet the needs of teachers with very different levels of ICT and ODL pedagogy skills. At some campuses, the teachers had extremely slow internet connections and no servers of their own, while at others the use of Moodle was already part of their daily teaching activities. These differences were natural for the regions in which the campuses were located: students close to Kathmandu and other population centres were better equipped to access and use online learning environments and open materials than students in regions where internet access was spotty or very slow. Taking into consideration the very different working environments, we decided to customise the training for each region, beginning from their current needs.

Naturally, the cultural context is also very different between Finland and Nepal. In Finland, teachers have a lot of freedom in how they design and run their courses, what tools they use and how they assess their students. In Nepal, on the

other hand, teachers follow strict curricula given to them from above and their students attend university-wide examinations at the end of their courses. Students are used to being given specific and clear assignments.

It therefore made no sense to attempt to transpose Finnish education practices to Nepali campuses. For this reason, the approach taken was based mostly on mentoring and support activities. Expert trainers visited each campus to get to know their situations before they began training the staff *in situ*. General seminars were arranged where selected staff members from all the campuses came together to learn and share ideas and experiences.

#### LESSONS FROM FINLAND

A core group of teachers were invited to Finland to attend a month-long training course, where they received in-depth information about the Finnish approach to teaching and guidance. The goal of the



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intertwined into this structure at all levels. In addition, the difficulties that the Finnish education system has faced, and their possible solutions, were openly discussed. These examples were not shown as models to adopt in the Nepali context, but

These two projects achieved a lot of progress in delivering ODL programmes. Major impacts include a change in attitude of administrators and faculty members towards ODL programmes and increased encouragement to use ICT technology. However, there are still many challenges: weak marketing of ODL programmes, limited ICT skills among students and poor ICT infrastructure, to mention just a few – but we are still very positive that these challenges can be overcome. If we are to meet the requirements of equal access to education in developing countries, ODL programmes like these are a necessity.

— SEJJA KOSKELA & MARKO SUSIMETSÄ

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## If we are to meet the requirements of equal access to education in developing countries, ODL programmes like these are a necessity

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programme was to provide understanding of how Finns approached teaching and ODL pedagogy, and also to provide the attendees with further tools and understanding of how they could adapt this thinking to their own cultural context.

The Finnish team presented examples of the sociocultural approach and how guidance and counselling were

as descriptions and explanations of how the Finnish system has become the way it is. The Nepali participants were given the responsibility of recognising and adapting to their use any such practices that might work in their own context. The site visits after this training period focused on supporting the teachers in their development work at campuses.

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# PREPARING STUDENTS FOR A DIGITAL SOCIETY





Digitalisation is not just a phenomenon affecting higher education, but also a field of study in its own right. In the fall of 2019, Maastricht University welcomed its first highly international cohort of students to a new bachelor's programme designed to instil in students the critical capacities needed to navigate digital society.

**M**aastricht University welcomed its first cohort of students for a new Bachelor's programme in 'Digital Society' in September 2019. This three-year, interdisciplinary programme provides students with a unique opportunity to develop skills required for a career at the intersection of technological developments and societal changes, with the goal of producing graduates who can help to shape and implement effective and ethical digital transformations.

To fully appreciate the ways in which digitalisation is affecting how we live and work, it is necessary to take an international perspective. Digital technologies have enormous potential to connect people

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Digital technologies have enormous potential to connect people around the world, but local customs and cultures still guide many activities

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around the world, and their production is a good example of global production. But national laws and local customs and cultures still guide many activities, so digitalisation does not necessarily make the world a uniform place.

Digitalisation promises tremendous benefits, but it also presents challenges. For example, robots can take on tasks that are dangerous for people – but at the same time can put people out of work. Digital data collection may improve healthcare by providing more personalised treatment – but it may also challenge patient privacy and autonomy. Digitalisation has brought

about new forms of social and political engagement, but not everyone has the skills needed to participate so some people are at risk of being excluded.

Both the advantages and disadvantages of digitalisation are addressed in the curriculum. We aim to produce a new generation of socio-technically knowledgeable and engaged humanities and social science graduates who are able to critically assess, anticipate and shape the social, political and cultural impacts of digital transformations. Graduates will be equipped to understand the technical aspects of social issues, and the social aspects of technological developments.

#### **BRIDGING DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES**

The BA Digital Society bridges the humanities and the social sciences to reflect upon and address the socio-technical challenges and opportunities of digitalisation, especially as they relate to society, culture and politics. It integrates research from history, philosophy, media and cultural studies, science and technology studies, digital arts and heritage studies, critical data studies and political science. The programme also incorporates knowledge and skills originating in data and computer science. Students acquire the skills required for 'computational thinking', namely the creative and critical capacity to assess how digital technologies may solve as well as raise societal concerns.

Interdisciplinarity is core to the design of the curriculum, and core to all of the work of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. The faculty's motto is 'moving boundaries, building bridges'. Different teaching and research programmes are all concerned with the relationships between Europeanisation, globalisation, scientific and technological changes, political change and cultural innovation. Paying attention to the historical contexts in which

technologies and cultures emerge and intertwine is also key to the teaching and research of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

We aim to train ‘interactional expertise’ in order to be able to mediate between different groups in society. They will be able to translate the questions and concerns of policymakers, private companies, civil society organisations and cultural institutions into problems understood by computer and data scientists. Equally, our graduates will understand enough about programming and systems in order to translate possible solutions in terms that can be understood by those who do not know that technical language. Graduates will also be able to imagine the range of possible future implications of emerging digital transformations, and thus will be able to foresee ethical and societal concerns.

#### **PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING**

Problem-based learning (PBL) is core to Maastricht’s teaching philosophy. Students work together in small groups of 15, with a tutor, to define their own learning goals. There are four key principles of PBL. First is constructive learning, in which students draw on prior knowledge and experience to help them understand new information from lectures and reading. Second is collaborative learning, in which students learn from one another and develop a sense of shared responsibility. Third is contextual learning, in which new information is placed in relevant contexts, to help students learn to transfer knowledge across different situations and to bridge theory

and practice. The fourth principle is self-directed learning, in which students play an active role in planning and evaluating their own learning. This is particularly important for digital society students. We know the situation is constantly changing, and thus students need to become confident life-long learners.

#### **THE FIRST COHORT**

Seventy-five students from twenty different countries started the programme in September 2019. This multicultural group provides students with opportunities

Healthcare systems are nationally organised and regulated but the World Wide Web and social media make it possible for people to learn about experimental treatments not yet available in their own countries, perhaps leading to innovation or to frustration.

We do not expect students who join the programme to have a technical background; all are welcome. As well as learning from staff, students will have many opportunities to learn from each other and to share technical, academic and professional skills.

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## Such a diverse group of students also sheds light on different reactions to phenomena ranging from surveillance to fake news

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to learn from one another, and to share experiences, consistent with the PBL principles outlined above. Digitalisation is often presented as a universalising process, but local and national contexts still play an important role in shaping how digital technologies are incorporated into people’s lives. Having students from different countries helps us to understand why some countries still use cash for small transactions whereas others operate already almost entirely with direct payment systems. Such a diverse group of students also sheds light on different reactions to phenomena ranging from surveillance to fake news. Some students come from countries where surveillance has been a feature of their lives and their parents’ lives, and may be regarded as benevolent or at least as normal.

#### **QUESTIONING THE TAKEN-FOR-GRANTED**

I prepared this text while Maastricht University was suffering the after-effects of a major ransomware attack that brought all of the university’s educational and administrative systems to a close for two weeks (and some even longer). This served as a stark reminder to us all not to take for granted the ways of working and learning offered by digital technologies. Once the crisis has passed, we will reflect not only on what the disruption means for how the university organises but also what it means for how we think about digital societies now and in the future.

— SALLY WYATT

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09  
DEC

## Expanding our boundaries as scholar-practitioners

The life of an internationalisation scholar-practitioner is a busy one, but it's full of rewards both personal and professional.

<http://ow.ly/rByk50yVmeE>



14  
JAN

## Strategic hiring: identifying the ideal international officer

Hiring a new international officer in the near future? Someone with a passion for travel is great, but make sure they also have these crucial qualities.

<http://ow.ly/1ut650yVmgL>



02  
MAR

## 5 questions to ask during strategic internationalisation planning

When working on strategic internationalisation planning for your department or institution, don't forget to ask yourself these 5 questions.

<http://ow.ly/IXgR50yVmk4>

## COVID-19 RESOURCES



20  
FEB

## Supporting students affected by coronavirus

Public health concerns should be front and centre, but we can't overlook the diverse ways in which students of different backgrounds can be affected by disease outbreaks.

<http://ow.ly/lalr50yVmwc>

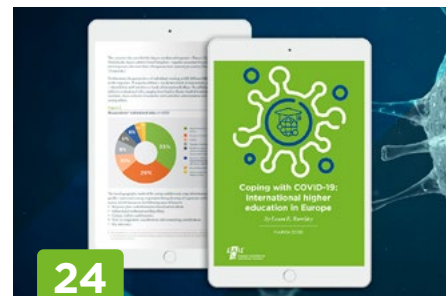


19  
MAR

## How higher education institutions can respond to COVID-19

The COVID-19 outbreak has left many in the higher education community with more questions than answers. Thankfully, examples are rapidly emerging of how we can take action.

<http://ow.ly/ipdG50yVmya>



24  
MAR

## New EAIE report on the impact of COVID-19

How is COVID-19 affecting international education so far? This March 2020 survey of European practitioners offers some preliminary perspectives.

<http://ow.ly/AQcX50yVmC0>



# CATALAN UNIVERSITIES

## FOSTERING A NEW KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY

The trend of digitalisation has emerged alongside the growth of the knowledge economy, which drives cities and countries across the world to compete to attract global talent and make the biggest impact in science and technology. Barcelona – host of the 32nd Annual EAIE Conference and Exhibition – is no exception. Empowered by Spain’s decentralised approach to higher education, Catalan universities are embracing their local strengths to punch above their weight on the global stage.

**G**lobalisation brings with it a wealth of opportunities, but it’s not entirely harmless – the reshaping of economies and societies risks increasing inequality and leaving entire countries, regions or communities behind. These are the challenges that Catalonia’s ‘2024 Strategy for a Knowledge Society’ seeks to address by strengthening research, technological development and innovation in order to create high-quality jobs, long-term employment and sustainable economic growth. Higher education in general, and internationalisation in particular, play a central role in this scheme.

### CATALONIA AS KNOWLEDGE HUB

Catalonia is one of the most dynamic European regions in terms of producing knowledge and talent. The foundations of this buoyant ecosystem are a strong scientific backbone and competitive academic



Photos courtesy of author

institutions delivering highly-skilled graduates, which in turn act as a beacon to attract and retain more talent to the ecosystem.

Catalonia overperforms in the main science indicators: despite making up just 1.5% of the population of the EU, Catalonia produces 3.7% of all European scientific papers, about 60% of which involve international collaborations. The main research centres of Catalonia are also European flagships, such as the Barcelona Supercomputing Centre and the European Molecular Biology Laboratory. This scientific infrastructure provides a unique environment for the 12 universities and 60 research centres of the region to conduct world-class research.

#### COMMITMENT TO SDGS

Catalonia offers international students access to a higher education system of quality in an excellent teaching environment, according to various international rankings. Catalan Universities are among the top 200 in the Times Higher Education and QS 2020 World University Rankings, and five of the region's universities are among the top 100 in the Times Higher Education 2019 Teaching Rankings for Europe.

Also remarkable is Catalan institutions' considerable progress towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in the form of both outputs of their research activities and as outcomes of their organisational policies.

For example, 43% of the Horizon 2020 and ERDF-funded initiatives in the region (€655.6m, 1107 projects and 664 institutions) from 2014 to 2019 address at least one of the SDGs.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Catalonia's Interuniversity Council leads a task force to implement coordinated actions and strategies to face 2030 Agenda challenges, with individual committees addressed to Gender Balance, Climate Emergency, and Inclusive Education.

#### THE CATALAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

In parallel to internationalisation, some countries – Spain among them – have undergone different degrees of decentralisation of their higher education systems at the subnational level. Since the 1980s, Catalonia has been able to partially develop its own system, as a reflection of the economic, social, cultural and political reality on the ground locally.

Catalonia overperforms in the main science indicators: despite making up just 1.5% of the population of the EU, Catalonia attracts over 3% of the most competitive EU research funds and produces 3.7% of all European scientific papers, about 60% of which involve international collaborations.

The result of such strong collaboration within a complex system and under the right policies is a quality of 'systemness', an undeniable signature of Catalonia's university system in its different internationalisation activities. For more than 30 years the collaboration between universities and the government has been one of the cornerstones of the system. The Inter-university Council of Catalonia (CIC), the coordinating body



of the Catalan University System, has become an essential instrument for collaboration between universities and with the government on all university matters, such as gender policy, internationalisation, employability or the action plan for achieving the SDGs.

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## Catalonia has been able to partially develop its own system, a reflection of the economic, social, cultural and political reality on the ground locally

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The CIC works through more than ten committees and several working groups in all the university matters, such as linguistic policy, academic staff policy, students, research, access and admissions, programmes and international

relations. As an example, since 2007 the International Affairs Committee, made up of the vice-chancellors in charge of International Relations and members of the government, has determined the main strategies to promote the Catalan system on the international stage, such

as the creation of the programme ‘Study in Catalonia’, or joint participation in international higher education forums. The good health of this collaboration has been key to achieving the positive results that we have highlighted.

Catalonia’s knowledge hub is well-known in Europe and around the world, largely due to the prominent role that the region has in the European Research Area and in the European Higher Education Area. One of the main guiding principles of the 2024 Strategy for a Knowledge Society is that the knowledge economy is built on intellectual capital. Universities play a key role in this, and their coordinated involvement will help make this vision a reality by continuing to increase their impact at the local, regional, European and global level.

— FRANCESC XAVIER GRAU I VIDAL,  
Secretary for Universities and Research,  
Government of Catalonia

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1. Data from <http://ris3mcat.gencat.cat>

# Coping with COVID-19: International higher education in Europe



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