



A Tradition of Innovation

## Coimbra Group Position Paper on the new Digital Education Action Plan

4 September 2020

### Preamble

This position paper was developed by the Coimbra Group (CG) Working groups (WGs) “Academic Exchange and Mobility” and “Education Innovation”. Together with other colleagues from the [Coimbra Group of European Universities](#), the abovementioned WGs have been committed, since the beginning of the pandemic crisis, to monitor the reactions from our institutions to the situation of emergency of spring 2020, and to discuss a common framework of strategies to cope with the crisis. In particular, mid- and long-term perspectives of academic mobility and teaching innovation have been the main concerns of the discussion within the WGs and between them and the Executive Board of this network.

The quality of teaching innovation and a closer integration of European university communities are actually two of the core missions of the Coimbra Group (CG) - an association of more than 40 long-established European multidisciplinary universities of high international standard. All of them have been committed since the very beginning to the Erasmus experience, and most of them have developed, over the years, a remarkable expertise in the field of collaborative and online teaching.

After the diffusion of the outbreak, the European Commission further stressed the importance of inclusion and blended mobility, disclosing the introduction of *short-term mobility experiences* and *flexible mobility formats*. As many other European HEIs, the CG universities decided to respond to the crisis leaning on previous experiences of blended and online teaching, and offering their online courses to their incoming students. In order to reach a good quality and to individuate valuable and convergent practices, several colleagues both from the academic bodies and from the Administration of member universities have discussed their priorities and their short-term strategies of online teaching. Several initiatives concerning Virtual Exchange (VE) and innovative online courses and tools have been announced. The CG aims at producing a systematic assessment of the present, extraordinarily innovative, experience.

Indeed, without renouncing the irreplaceable role of physical mobility of students, academics, and staff in the building of a closer and closer European educational area, the Coimbra Group will play a proactive role in the future phase of implementation of innovative and collaborative forms of VE and innovative teaching.

This paper is largely on the basis of the report “[Practices at Coimbra Group Universities in response to the COVID-19 – A Collective Reflection on the Present and Future of Higher Education in Europe](#)”.

### Remote emergency teaching and dual mode teaching

There was a lack of preparedness for the transition to the online format, which consisted above all of recording or live streaming lectures, also referred to as “emergency remote teaching”. Synchronous video conferencing and recording tools were widely adopted as universities sought to provide continuity in education. In plans for the autumn semester many institutions are developing dual-mode approaches which often mean live streaming from the classroom with reduced numbers of students in the physical classroom (dual mode). Yet there is concern about the quality and effectiveness of this dual mode of teaching.

### Recommendations

Designing for quality online and blended learning experiences should ensure that participants are not passive listeners but be engaged in active and meaningful learning. Designing for this requires expertise, time and human resources.

The digital education action plan should acknowledge this and support initiatives for the professional development of educators to equip them to support active and engaging learning online. It should highlight the importance of teaching and learning centres/learning designers/technologists who can support teaching staff in the development and implementation of online and hybrid courses.



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## **Assessment**

One of the main challenges HEIs faced with the Covid-19 crisis was regarding exams and the assessment of student learning. Various solutions were adopted from the re-design of assessments to alternative formats such as open book exams to the use of proctoring software and plagiarism detection software - in most universities a combination of both. Several universities reported strong pushback (from students and/or staff) against proctoring solutions, highlighting ethical and privacy issues (see <https://hybridpedagogy.org/our-bodies-encoded-algorithmic-test-proctoring-in-higher-education/>).

### *Recommendations*

The Digital Education Action Plan should address assessment in digital education. It should include measures that support educators in the development of online formative and summative approaches to assessment and recognition of student learning which are equitable, inclusive and relevant to today's society.

## **Social distancing and the need to create communities online**

Both educators and students were reported to have suffered the social and psychological impact of confinement, isolation and social distancing. Those who have been most affected are those who were more marginalized before the pandemic, and hybrid/dual models risk further exacerbating this. How can access be ensured for students or teachers who can only learn online? How can we connect them to a learning community?

### *Recommendations*

Digital Education should support the development of teaching and learning communities (communities of care) online where peer learning is supported and which can create a sense of belonging. The human and relational side of education should be emphasised in the Digital Education Action Plan, whereas much emphasis has been on the data-driven and personalised learning pathways.

## **Inclusion, Access and equity**

Digital learning can make HE more accessible for some categories of students (working students, those with caring responsibilities, limited mobility,...). Digital education can support students with disabilities, however teaching and assessment methods and digital tools used can also create additional barriers to learning if issues such as accessibility are not taken into account. Furthermore, during the Covid-19 crisis universities reported students having problems with connectivity and devices. Various schemes were adopted from loaning of computers to providing students with SIM cards. In some contexts arrangements were made for students to access hardware on university premises for assessment purposes, however these solutions were taken up by very few students.

### *Recommendations*

The Digital Education Action Plan should highlight the importance of inclusive teaching practices (see for example <https://www.nuigalway.ie/disability/staff-support/inclusive-teaching/>) and uses of technology. Digital education in HE needs support structures which should also improve and broaden assistance and counselling for students in digital learning, and update support channels to the needs and expectations of younger generations.

Research has found that technology cannot fix social inequality, there are many intertwined aspects related to inequality. Though access schemes can help they need to connect with more holistic support programmes.



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## **Internationalisation and digital education**

Student and staff mobility is another aspect of higher education that was strongly affected by Covid-19 with a halt to physical mobility and long-term impact on student mobility predicted. At the same time the need for international collaborations and mutual learning and understandings has never been stronger.

Digital education can support internationalisation in many ways, but digital education and internationalisation are rarely considered together in HE. In the Digital Education Action Plan 2018-2020 reference is made to the European Student eCard and Erasmus without Papers. These are extremely valuable initiatives and will make mobility easier for students. However they focus only on administrative aspects of mobility, and there are many more ways that digital education can support impactful international and intercultural learning experiences.

One of the main values of communication technologies is their power to connect people who are geographically distant from one another, and to support the development of transnational collaborations and communities for mutual learning, fostering relations of reciprocity and exchange. But transnational collaboration does not come naturally - whether face to face or online, and online transnational collaborations in the classroom are not integrated in HEIs (see result of the [EVOLVE baseline study](#)). There is a vast literature on silos and echo chambers - the tendency to stay within homogeneous groups, in the online world as well as in the offline world, even in the university classroom.

### *Recommendations*

Digital education can support internationalisation and internationalisation at home in multiple ways - but the quality of digital education is important. The EC's role should be to support quality transnational digital education initiatives which foster collaboration and mutual learning at multiple levels - above all which impact the teaching and interactions taking place in classrooms.

The Digital Education Action Plan should support networked classes or initiatives co-taught by educators working across geographic and cultural borders (for example [Lecture Series: European Narratives](#)), not only within Europe but also beyond; quality virtual exchanges which bring together diverse groups of students supported by trained facilitators ([Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange | European Youth Portal](#)); co-designed, challenge-based, international and interdisciplinary online courses which actively engage students in collaborations with each other and with industry and/or civil society organizations (see for example [NICE project](#)); the use of virtual exchange in blended mobility programmes.

The Digital Education Action Plan should promote initiatives which are designed to bring young people and students outside of their silos. Online international educational programmes need to be intentionally designed to promote and facilitate interaction and collaboration across social, cultural, linguistic and geographic divides and on themes which are relevant to society, but this needs to be supported (see for example [Cultural Encounters](#)).

## **Not just the technology**

Institutions can be perfectly equipped with technology but past experiences, for example, with interactive whiteboards, have shown that unless educators are interested in and know how to use them in pedagogically sound and appropriate ways will there be limited take-up and impact on learning and large investments are wasted.

### *Recommendations*

It is only through active involvement and engagement of educators that digital education will be implemented. The Digital Education Action Plan should encourage the investment in strategies that support the mission of public universities and the development and support of their staff so that they are equipped to use technology in ways that provide students with learning experiences and forms of assessment that are equitable, fair, accessible and relevant to their specific contexts - even in situations such as that we are facing today.



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## Collaboration with private sector, surveillance and data protection

The educational technology sector is expanding rapidly but it is important to understand the political economy of edtech and platform companies, and how the datafication of education might further empower and advance the interests of data-driven edtech companies, researchers and advocates. There are concerns over data privacy and the use of data for student profiling and control. Furthermore, 'global commercial platforms incorporated into public education risk challenging education as a public good' (Hillman, Bergviken Rensfeldt, and Ivarsson [2020](#), 7–8; Williamson, Eynon & Potter, 2020).

### *Recommendations*

The Digital Education Action Plan should pay attention to values in higher education, an understanding of the risks of datafication of education and raise awareness of the importance of a critical understanding of the political economy of the edtech sector and its use of student data.

Open educational practices should be supported and promoted, such as HE partnerships with Wikimedia and the [Wikimedian in Residence programme at the University of Edinburgh](#) whereby educators teach and assess through Wikipedia and students learn to write and edit Wikipedia entries, also contributing to Open Knowledge.

## Conclusions

The Coimbra Group is a distinguished (and solid) example of a network of “mid-sized epistemic communities” and stands in between the bilateral and specialistic cooperation experiences (ex. Erasmus small multilateral projects like *EU alliances*) and the European Education Area as a whole. This dimension has provided the organization with an understanding of standardization of certain procedures, evaluation and quality control, and the importance and value of collaboration and exchange of educational practices. Multilateral efforts of scrutiny and critical assessment (see for instance the recent [benchmarking initiative on internationalization of our universities](#)) are constantly produced within the network, in order to enhance the degree of integration and to reach higher standard of efficiency. Under the pandemic times, our effort has been multiplied, since the experience of mutual cooperation at the meso-level may be a catalyst to produce creative and effective practices. Such practices have to be rapidly set, in order to offer a viable action in these times of constraints. At the same time, these practices have to be consolidated in order to produce a set of ground-breaking tools and procedures to be maintained when physical mobility and crowded international classes will come back to populate and to colour our European city-campuses.

As pointed out by Williamson, Eynon & Potter (2020), “Education has become an emergency matter, and along with it, educational technologies have been positioned as a frontline emergency service”. There is an important need for a collective, critical reflection on this large scale pivot to digitally mediated education as well as an understanding of historically and contextually specific education and technology-related policies, practices, challenges and risks. The few implications and recommendations we have started in this draft paper take the same direction of a critical but concrete and optimistic analysis, providing a contextual analysis of our short-term assessment of our practices in pandemic times with a longer and comprehensive perspective which contemplates other essential goals of the future European education system, like green deal and social inclusiveness.

### *References*

Hillman, T., A. Bergviken Rensfeldt, and J. Ivarsson. 2020. “Brave new Platforms: A Possible Platform Future for Highly Decentralised Schooling.” *Learning, Media and Technology* 45 (1): 7–16. DOI: [10.1080/17439884.2020.1683748](#)  
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