

Internationalization, Digitalization, and COVID: A German Perspective

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Digitalization has been a pressing issue on the agenda for quite some time, and for good reason. Now, however, we are facing a turning point: COVID-19 is speeding up many processes; the cards are being reshuffled. We find ourselves in the middle of an extensive transformation process, which will change not only the academic world of universities, but also our working environment—and our lives in general.

The Impact of COVID-19 on International Higher Education

Universities, international higher education, and international research collaboration will look quite different after COVID-19, for several reasons. Science has never been as important as today. We need tight-knitted networks to face major global themes such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, since no country can overcome these challenges on its own. The fight against COVID-19 illustrates that fact.

International research collaboration has proven to be quite fruitful and resilient during this crisis. More research has been published in an international context than during a similar time period before COVID-19, especially during the beginning of the crisis. For good reasons: Research partners knew each other very well, a common understanding and trust existed on all sides. Switching to a digital mode was easy. Therefore, scientific cooperation will be the key to successful internationalization in the future.

The Role of Digitalization in Higher Education

But what is the role of digitalization amid all these trends? Digitalization renders us much more independent from time and space. The largest accelerator in this process has been COVID-19. Mobility came to a stop in March 2020 and left no other option. From one day to the next, universities worldwide had to move to virtual classrooms. Universities all over the world had to find new ways of teaching and doing research. If we look back over the last few months altogether, this change worked quite well.

So, is everything all right and will the academic world soon become entirely digital? Most likely not—but what will the future look like? The role of physical and digital mobility will definitely change. As mentioned before, the switch to digitalization in cooperation worked quite well because researchers already knew each other, had met before, and were used to working together.

Students and the New Academic World

Meanwhile, circumstances look quite different for students. The younger generation deserves the chance to get to know each other personally, build intercultural skills, meet people in a foreign country, learn about different perspectives, develop trust and networks and all the benefits deriving from physical mobility. Therefore, on this level, physical mobility will still play a very important role. Nevertheless, digitalization can be a useful tool to prepare and accompany physical mobility.

We do know that at least 50 percent of all students in Germany will never go abroad for several reasons, for example, funding or family. Here again, digitalization can support internationalization at home in many ways. A further advantage of digitalization is that it allows for a new diversity. Digitalization might serve as one of the main catalysts in reaching new target groups, offering equal opportunities, diversifying the student body, and allowing more outreach.

Abstract

Digitalization of higher education has been a pressing issue on the agenda for quite some time and for good reason. Higher education will look quite different after the COVID-19 pandemic: Digital change is not merely advancing technology, but organizational and systemic innovation that affects all areas of higher education and the educational system. The university of the future will, in all its aspects, be an international university, physically as well as virtually.

Will the academic world soon become entirely digital?

The quality of studies might improve because it is much easier and more convenient to bring the most renowned scientists together in a virtual space than to expect them to travel. But we should not forget that a lot depends on digital infrastructure. We should keep this in mind whenever we think about digital cooperation. There are still parts in the world where access cannot be taken for granted. And we should not increase the digital divide that already exists. Circling back to individuals, it is noticeable that the benefits of digital formats of mobility increase depending on how far an individual is in their studies.

An academic environment that is 100 percent digital is, however, unlikely to become a reality for the majority of students worldwide. We know from research done in this field that currently, digital study programs offer an alternative to only 10 percent of students interested in internationalization. We might look at a different picture if we focused on lifelong learning and not only on full study programs, but also on micro credentials.

Looking Beyond the Digitalization of Academic Mobility

Therefore, in the future, we have to ask ourselves what effects and outcomes we expect from mobility, to then be able to decide which kind of mobility—whether of a physical or virtual kind—offers the best approach to reach this goal.

This is just one dimension of digitalization and its role for internationalization. However, internationalization is so much more than just mobility. To continue this train of thought, we might not only have to rethink internationalization, but universities as a whole. European universities and their respective networks have had to switch to digitalization to uphold their multilateral cooperation. As mentioned before, digitalization renders us more independent and flexible. Why should each university offer the same courses? Would it not make sense to join forces and develop study programs together, the way it works within some area studies at German universities?

A different dimension will be to digitalize the student journey and the field of administration at universities. Students will be supported individually according to their needs and interests and be guided through their journey to the foreign country of their choice, to the university where they might decide to study. All this could be organized conveniently and efficiently via digitalization and artificial intelligence. This is not a *brave new world*, it is already a reality in Germany in the form of personalized concepts via a platform called MyGuide supporting and guiding prospective students on their way from their home country to the university of their choice in various host countries.

Conclusion

All in all, digital change is not merely advancing technology, but organizational and systematic innovation that affects all areas of higher education and the educational system. We should avoid isolated solutions, which might be the mistake of the past. All parts of universities will be affected, including the content of teaching, because in such unknown environments students will need new skills. And, last but not least, this development asks for a new governance. We need a holistic strategic approach. This offers a completely new quality to internationalization. The university of the future will be an international university in all aspects, physically as well as virtually. ▲

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