

What does the future hold for Europe's Universities?

A lasting lesson from this pandemic is that collaboration can lead to a more sustainable future for higher education – through its worst crisis, a shared ecosystem inspired a global solution that minimised the impact of campus closures worldwide. **Anthony Tattersall** investigates





Incorporating in-demand skills that employers are looking for into the universities' curriculum is the obvious way forward

In February 2020, when higher education was hit by the COVID-19 outbreak, Duke Kunshan University in China – a partnership between Duke University and Wuhan University – was searching for a solution to continue teaching 600 students in quarantine. Without the luxury of time or resources in the midst of a public health crisis, Duke Kunshan University found support in the high-calibre library of courseware from hundreds of Coursera partners on Coursera for Campus. By deploying ready-made, online courses aligned to their curriculum, Duke Kunshan faculty rapidly transitioned to remote teaching, ensuring learning continuity.

This solution led to a model that scaled with agility when large-scale campus closures disrupted learning for millions of students worldwide. Over the last year, Coursera for Campus enabled more than 4,000 universities to frame a resilient crisis response through the upheaval of the pandemic. This equates to 2.7 million students and 24 million course enrolments.

Just one year since this drastic change, a recent report by the European University Association (EUA), which includes data from 48 countries, already points towards educators feeling digital learning can be 'a powerful change driver'. Participants in this report said it has unlocked benefits like 'collaboration with other higher education institutions at an international level' (64%) and 'widened outreach for international students' (57%).

These benefits will be needed as European universities refocus their priorities for the academic year ahead. The uncertainty around enrolments is forcing budget cuts and impacting revenue, while the mobility of international students and rising student deferrals pose new risks to universities. Rethinking alternative, high-quality learning experiences will be critical to deliver an elevated experience – one that is perceived as "valuable" even when it is not delivered in-person and on campus.

As the digital transformation of higher education continues and universities adjust to the shifting student priorities created by the crisis, the question is, what can universities do to adapt from the experimentation phase of the past year to shape a longer-term response?

Enhancing employability through blended classrooms

According to the 2021 EU joint employment report, the COVID crisis is 'breaking a six-year-long positive trend in the European Union's labor market'. It cautions that member states risk a sharp increase in youth employment. A job market under stress has serious implications for new graduates. Higher education institutes will have to fine-tune their focus on the "employability" of students entering this crisis-ridden job market in order to address the challenge.

Incorporating in-demand skills that employers are looking for into the universities' curriculum is the obvious way forward. If curricula stand scrutiny for industry-relevant competencies, graduates have more chances of emerging job-ready and employable.

Collaborating with other universities on content through a blended classroom model, where universities offer ready-made courses from top institutions on online learning platforms that supplement their degree offerings, could be a way for universities to deliver an upgraded education that fills these gaps.

This supplemental option is student-friendly because it is flexible, self-paced, and it allows students to easily explore new interests outside their major. Its pioneers include the University of Salzburg, which is using online courses on Coursera to enrich students in their Computer Science Department with international knowledge and perspective and HigherEd, the careers platform for EFMD, which recently partnered with Coursera to provide access to job-relevant content for students from 700 business schools in 90 countries.

2.7m

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Preparing students for the jobs of tomorrow

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2020 finds that between now and 2025, companies expect to restructure their workforces in response to new technologies like cloud computing, big data analytics, IoT and cybersecurity. Demand for digital job roles, like that of a data scientist and machine learning specialist, will increase. Universities will need to align curriculums based on predicted market demand, to equip graduates for these jobs.

Teaching skills across high-demand domains like cybersecurity, data science, and cloud computing will become extremely important. In a "business education", for instance, technology and data science are becoming increasingly critical skill areas for popular careers such as financial advisor, marketer or management consultant. Universities can look to supplement degree programs with courses taught by leading industry educators like Google, Amazon, and Facebook, whose tools are often used on-the-job. By leveraging these resources, higher education institutions will be well placed to augment in-house programmes, fast enough to adapt to digital transformation.

When top-ranked Hungarian university, University of Szeged, was looking to modernise the delivery of its curriculum, it opened up access for students to learning material on Coursera for Campus – this would otherwise have taken months to develop. 'Students want more flexibility in how they earn their degrees,' explains Peter Szakál, Director of Academic Affairs at the University of Szeged, adding, 'Expanding our distance learning with high-quality courses allows us to attract more students from Hungary, across Europe, and abroad, which ultimately fosters greater diversity and success for our students and university.'

Institutes across Europe – including OpenCampus.sh, Germany and Sofia University, Bulgaria – are also integrating content through Coursera for Campus to deliver job-relevant, multi-disciplinary online learning.

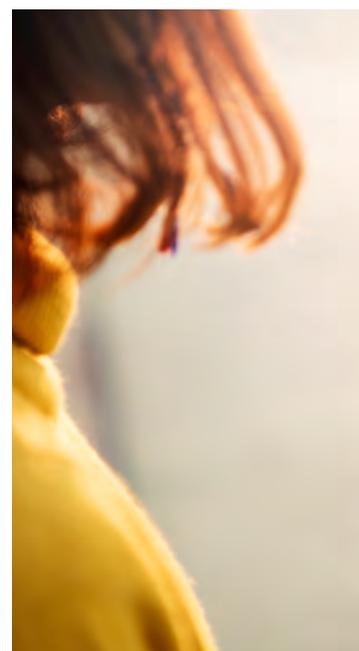
Equipping students to master job-relevant skills digitally

Another big fallout for students over the pandemic has been the lost opportunity to gain work experience through internships, which traditionally give students a chance to prove their mettle as "future prospects". Three fifths of employers say they had to cancel some or all of their work experience placements last summer in the UK. Much is the same across the rest of Europe and the world. "Hands-on" learning has emerged as an alternative for students to demonstrate their ability to apply job-relevant skills and use in-demand tools.

For example, conducting data analysis using python, or building websites using WordPress can be learnt through Guided Projects on Coursera. Guided Projects launched during the pandemic and have seen a spike in demand ever since, as students look for ways to reinterpret skill development virtually – to show employers what they can do. Top engineering school in Morocco, Ecole Centrale Casablanca, is one of several institutions looking to leverage hands-on learning, using Coursera's Guided Projects.

Collaborating for future success

If anything, the pandemic has catalysed a shift towards global collaboration. 'All of a sudden, people had to think of new ways to integrate online content, and that made it necessary to collaborate because [educators] were looking for help,' said Steffen Brandt, project lead and programme evaluation (Data Science and AI) at Opencampus.sh, Germany, speaking recently at a pan-European webinar hosted by *THE* and Coursera. He added that, previously, German professors 'wouldn't use another professor's teaching content, but this process has now started'. Thrown in at the deep end, universities opened their doors virtually to share resources for the larger community to move forward. Imperial College of London opened up its digital learning hub, which included a detailed walk-through on delivering labs remotely. University of London built a support hub for institutions teaching and assessing online.



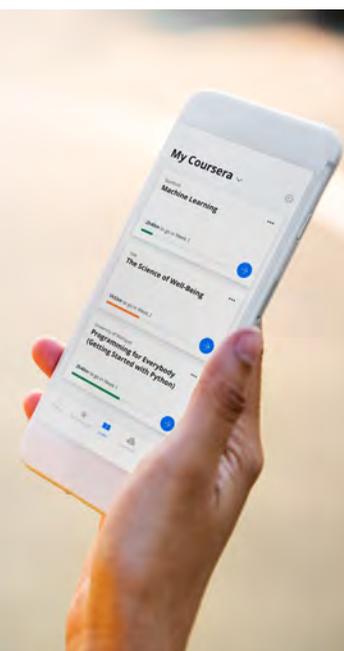


Looking ahead, collaboration as a strategy could strengthen and future-proof higher education in the region. The European Universities Initiative is already showing the way by reimagining inter-university campuses and harnessing the diversity of alliance members. IDEA League, an alliance of five leading science and technology universities in Europe, is rethinking how to foster greater exchange and partnership, including sharing lectures and co-designing new courses.

'What we know for sure is that no institution will be able to make it alone. Cooperation is the real fulcrum of the pandemic,' Ferruccio Resta, rector of Politecnico di Milano, a member institution of IDEA League, observed in a recent article.

Working together could create new ecosystems for much larger impact and expanded access. Pooling resources could address some of the big challenges facing higher education after the pandemic, including bridging current faculty shortages, improving affordability and enabling universities to better optimise their offerings.

A united higher education system would undoubtedly build a stronger ecosystem. It would also empower universities across the region to expand their mission – to significantly improve access and reach to a high-quality education, even as they equip students with the skills to succeed in an uncertain world.



About the Author

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