

How a new study-abroad scheme points the way for European business schools

The potential of technology, broadening cooperation and accessibility, and tearing down barriers, by **Josep Franch**





1987

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The chance for international collaboration has long been a central appeal of the business school experience. For almost four decades, European schools have sought to foster harmonisation in the spirit of continental ideals. Since 1987, the Erasmus exchange programme (later Erasmus+), launched two years before the Berlin Wall fell, has seen over 9 million students gaining academic and professional experience abroad. Soon after, in 1988, CEMS, a global alliance of 34 business schools, multinational companies and NGOs jointly delivering Masters in Management programmes, was created by Esade and our European partners. Then, on the eve of the Millennium in 1999, the EU-initiated Bologna Process laid a pathway to the transformation of European higher education and the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2010.

Many thousands of students have benefitted from what has become a tradition, but since 2020, the pandemic has turned this world of free-spirited face-to-face global collaboration upside down. Business schools, which regard teaching their students the intercultural skills needed to succeed in a global workplace as a central aspect of their mission, were seriously impacted as teaching was forced online and exchange abroad experiences were cancelled or postponed. How could our students get the international exposure and immersion in foreign cultures they needed?

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Although forced on schools at first, the surprising fact of how remarkably effective the new ways have been has seen schools, including Esade, reframe how we might integrate online teaching more fully into our programmes. A more digital approach has the potential to give our students the international exposure and experience they need while also reducing the economic and environmental burdens associated with travelling. Used well, it can enhance and enrich the traditional campus experience, broadening collaboration and opening doors to those previously excluded. At the same time, it became clear that while this technological approach was a game-changer, it would only work if universities and business schools were willing to cooperate and share.

At Esade, we have responded to this unique challenge by creating the European Common Online Learning (ECOL) network, together with six other European universities and business schools – Aalto University School of Business (Finland), Bocconi University (Italy), Copenhagen Business School (Denmark), Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (The Netherlands), University of St Gallen (Switzerland) and WU Vienna (Austria). Launched in September 2021, ECOL provides a permanent offer of online credited elective courses that co-exist with universities and business schools' current undergraduate academic offerings, including on-site programmes that have resumed this academic year.





2021

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ECOL is a practical response to a challenging time, and aims to create a new European, common curriculum, building on the innovations stemming from the pandemic. It operates on the principle of mutual trust and aims to lead in Europe in establishing new cooperation formats for the benefit of student communities and beyond, on the principle that barriers should be minimised to foster a vision of working together in line with the collaborative approach that was fundamental to the Bologna Process from the start.

As an online programme that will be sustained as a hybrid business school environment emerges, ECOL, still very much in the pilot stages, is just one example of the ongoing transformation of business education and the potential of technology, and of how schools are working towards a common European curriculum, to be expanded and

developed over time. While this first trial year is restricted to undergraduate programmes, the plan is to extend it to postgraduate and fulltime programmes, to make a model that other universities can follow. In general, a wider shift in higher education towards a European curriculum is vital to prepare students across Europe to face the challenges of the post-pandemic environment in their own countries and the wider region, which includes Europe's periphery. A collaborative approach will address weaker aspects and sectors, draw on strengths and provide practical solutions to address Europe's needs.

While the online aspect can never fully replace face-to-face teaching (nor should it), it need no longer be seen as a disadvantage adopted grudgingly. Instead, its potential should be understood as broadening cooperation, accessibility and practicality, while tearing down barriers. And we in the business school community must face the fact that things will never be the same again. As we move closer towards a hybrid education model, initiatives like ECOL will play their part in allowing even more students to gain their desired international experience by working with a wider group of students from different schools and in different countries, widening opportunity and lowering both the financial burden and carbon footprint of gaining international experience. In an increasingly digital world, this feels a natural step to take, and a step forward to making higher education more inclusive and sustainable, in the spirit of Bologna, Erasmus and beyond.

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About the Author

Josep Franch, Dean of Esade Business School