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# Looking into the next academic year
# through the recommendations from students

## Introduction

During the past several months the higher education landscape in Europe, as well as around the world has seen major transformation in many forms - in delivery, assessment and recognition of knowledge and competencies. The sudden changes have affected the lives and realities of many students and it is globally foreseen that a changed blended reality will persist during the upcoming academic year, if not even longer.

To dive into these transformations, ESU has organized a webinar series focusing on the possibilities that e-learning offers, assessment in e-learning,  as well as the quality and recognition of e-learning. Generally we can conclude from the webinar series that emergency online learning developed during the pandemic highly differs from 'real', strategically implemented e-learning.  Therefore, we want to look beyond the pandemic and see which challenges and opportunities come with e-learning and which obstacles need to be overcome in order to sustainably develop e-learning throughout and beyond the next academic year. There are many factors to take into account for successful e-learning - fully or partially (combined with on-site courses): students and teachers need to be trained in digital literacy, privacy and data protection need to be taken into account, accessibility needs to be guaranteed for all and changes need to be made to transfer the feeling of community into an online learning environment. E-learning and blended learning offer many opportunities for accessibility, lifelong learning and short cycle education, but we need to ensure to find suitable alternatives in terms of social connection, interactivity and student-friendly environments as provided in face-to-face learning.

The pandemic also puts under threat the international dimension of education. According to the SchengenVisaInfo.com survey results, 30% of the respondent students said they would cancel their studies in Europe if the online learning is to be chosen as the delivery mode and 22.3% said that they probably would cancel their studies[1]. These numbers highlight that the international study experience can't be replaced by internationalization from home strategies, students need physical mobility and even during these challenging times the international dimension of university education should not be compromised.

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[1]https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/52percent-of-international-students-very-likely-to-cancel-studies-in-europe-if-they-have-to-take-classes-online/

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Whether for international or local students, thoroughly planned e-learning highly differs from simply moving traditional learning to the online world. E-learning should not just be seen as a mere projection of learning through technological tools, but much broader: *"E-learning is an innovative web-based system based on digital technologies and other forms of educational materials whose primary goal is to provide students with a <u>personalized</u>, <u>learner-centred</u>, <u>open</u>, <u>enjoyable</u> and <u>interactive</u> learning environment supporting and enhancing the learning processes."* [2]

Highlighting the student centredness of e-learning, it shall start from the motivation and interests of the students themselves, allow for flexible learning pathways, break up strict curricula, and focus on interactivity and community building. These characteristics are key when we all plan the next semester and beyond.

### E-learning in the academic year 2020-2021

Universities across Europe are preparing for different scenarios for the 2020-2021 academic year. Only a few of the higher education institutions' plans for the preparation of the upcoming semesters include creating a blended approach for physical campus attendance and virtual learning from home, looking into the quality assurance of this approach, ensure timely communication about this to students, and in short thoroughly developing quality blended learning solutions.

Below, we address points that are of utmost importance for planning a sustainable and effective use of e-learning in the upcoming semesters. First we give a summary of all the recommendations and then elaborate on each of them.

<u>Summary of recommendations</u>
➔ *Communicate clearly:* Communication between all stakeholders is crucial to find common ground and solutions acceptable for all. Constant sharing of information and good practices amongst HEIs is extremely important to make e-learning a success
➔ *Act for accessibility:* Guaranteeing accessibility to all students is the starting point of successful e-learning.
➔ *Involve students in decision making:* Involvement of stakeholders, especially students, already in the planning and policy making process can increase the acceptance and support for e-learning.
➔ *Guarantee privacy and data protection:* Privacy and data security should be guaranteed and transparently communicated.

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[2] Rodrigues H, Almeida F, Figueiredo V & Loes SL (2019). Tracking e-learning through published papers: a systematic review. *Computers & Education,* 136, 87-98.

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➔ *Support teachers*: Teachers need to be trained and supported to be successful teachers in e-learning

➔ *Remember co-creation:* Extra efforts should be made to create a lively and open learning community.

➔ *Be interactive:* Interactivity with and towards the students is even more important in an online learning environment.

➔ *Focus on the learning outcomes:* It is important to carefully redefine the learning outcomes where needed to ensure they truthfully reflect what students have achieved through their learning.

➔ *Apply diverse assessment methods:* In online learning there are many different assessment methods possible. In order for students to truly obtain the learning outcomes defined in the programs multiple assessment methods should be applied.

➔ *Remember to do QA:* Quality assurance is key to successful learning and should be applied taking into account the unique elements of e-learning.

➔ *Start and end with recognition:* Recognition procedures should be already taken into consideration during the planning process in order to ensure smooth performance

➔ *Don't discriminate against the international students*: International students should be given equal opportunities to study in a university. As long as they can not physically come to campus, online alternatives have to be offered by the university.

➔ *Don't call internationalization at home a virtual mobility*: mobility comes with different challenges and opportunities for students than an online experience. Internationalization at home could therefore not be called mobility.

➔ *Prepare your support services*: Exchange and support structures are essential to promote interactivity and identification of needs for support.

*Prepare a robust and student-friendly system.* We have often seen the data centres of universities being overloaded during the pandemic, servers and systems were not ready for such a situation. Institutions shouldn't hesitate to invest resources in building robust and functional systems that will ensure the existence of well equipped information communication technologies. It is also important that the interface of these systems is student-friendly and accessible. It should meet the needs of students as users of the platforms, guaranteeing the security and privacy of their data and credentials.

*Communicate clearly.* During the spring 2020 semester, at the peak of the COVID-19 outbreak in Europe, a lot of students were left in uncertainty because they did not receive any details about their placements, mobilities, assessments, housing, support services, etc. Many students across Europe were not informed about assessment approaches when surveyed by

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ESU by the end of April. Therefore, we want to stress that a robust, timely and responsive communication strategy is crucial for universities for the upcoming semester.

*Act for accessibility.* When often from the surface it seems that e-learning is accessible to many just because many have access to the internet, we fail to understand the full meaning of accessible learning. First, we have seen many students struggle with not having a good quality device and high speed internet access for learning from home. Many can not afford expensive smartphones and laptops, and internet providers usually do not invest resources to ensure quality internet in distant regions and villages. Secondly, being a student often implies living with family or friends, sharing rooms and other common spaces, and consequently this means being left with no calm place to study. Thirdly, students are required to have a certain level of digital literacy to be able to participate in E-learning. Fourthly, requirements of students with special needs should be already taken into account when planning and implementing E-learning structures. Centralized support structures are needed for those who struggle with accessibility of E-learning and disadvantaged groups in E-learning should be actively assisted. Universities and education authorities should create mechanisms to address such access needs for all students. The next semester needs to secure access both to digital tools, devices and connection, as well as to safe, user-oriented and constructive learning environments.

*Involve students in decision making.* During the emergency times, we have seen that some institutions have been taking decisions without involving students. It is definitely understandable that during such situations time is a crucial factor. Therefore, the cooperation with students needs to be seamlessly functional on regular terms so that during the emergency they are also involved in rapid decision-making procedures. Open discussions and jointly developed policies can increase acceptance for e-learning among stakeholders and thereby its efficient and timely implementation. The promotion of student representative structures is crucial even more important in a digital learning environment as the physical platform for direct exchange with peers and teachers is not given. Therefore, a strategic implementation of student representation in e-learning structures and feedback mechanisms is key.

*Guarantee privacy and data protection.* Security and privacy protection play a crucial role in the implementation of e-learning, especially when it comes to assessment. E-assessment without the opt-out for alternative on-site examinations can limit students' freedom and makes them dependent on the data protection policies of their institutions. Universities have to offer an alternative if students have problems with their privacy and assessment methods should be chosen with the consent of students.

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*Support teachers*. Teachers are as important in e-learning as in traditional learning but the way of learning and the methods of communication change. Teachers are at the core of facilitating implementation of e-learning. In this regard, support for the academic staff both technically and pedagogically, are crucial. Teachers should be provided with the digital infrastructure that is necessary to facilitate e-learning. But more importantly, teachers should be trained and constantly supported to teach in an online learning environment. This concerns pedagogical training, workshops, and best practices sharing with other teachers.

*Remember co-creation.* A student-centered approach that actively involves all stakeholders, including students, in the creation of learning and teaching should not only be aimed for in traditional education but also in e-learning. E-learning offers an enormous potential to allow students to shape their own learning path in their time, place and space. This asks for continuous interaction between students, teachers and support staff. In an online learning environment it is even more important to actively create a community since there is no on-campus interaction.

*Be interactive.* E-learning by definition does not imply that every learner is learning alone and individually. E-learning platforms and infrastructure open new possibilities for interactivity and community-building through the internet with peers, teachers and the wider community. Due to the lack of physical meeting space, communication and interactivity with and towards the students is only more important in an online learning environment. However, these are new ways of interaction that are different to what we are used to naturally and adaption time is needed. In the same regard, ICT solutions and platforms for e-learning should be designed in a way to promote interactivity and should be oriented towards high user-friendliness to involve learners with different levels of digital literacy and needs. ICT services should match with the educational mission of the teaching staff and the learners community and serve their needs in design and user-friendliness.

*Focus on the learning outcomes.* The E-learning environment obviously changes the way knowledge and skills are acquired by students. Consequently, these may also affect the learning outcomes that the learners are entitled to have. It is important to carefully redefine the learning outcomes where needed to ensure they truthfully reflect what students have achieved through their learning. Equally important is consideration of the credits allocated to the subjects, since as we hear from students their workloads has increased in many cases due to, for example, more reading or listening materials sent by teachers. Learning outcomes should clearly reflect these differences students experience in the e-learning/blended learning environments.

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*Apply diverse assessment methods.* Despite exams that potentially require online proctoring other assessment methods can be used as alternatives. This includes alternatives for the format of assessment, for example assessment methods that do not require face-to-face supervision such as writing essays, research proposals or presentations. Furthermore, alternatives to a teacher-student assessment relationship can be used such as peer assessment (student to student assessment) or approaches where students assess themselves. Online assessment techniques can range from peer to fully technological-based solutions. Those have to focus in any case on assessing the learning outcomes that are defined for the classes.

*Remember to do QA.* Quality Assurance as a tool for ensuring quality control and enhancement is as important in e-education as in traditional education however there are important differences in interpretation of quality standards. Especially -learning success, retention rates and students' feedback need to be monitored carefully and linked with subsequent quality management and corresponding support structures.

*Start and end with recognition.* E-learning is one of many ways to promote accessible lifelong learning. Recognition is an important step in the life cycle of e-learning that should not be neglected. However, there are important differences between recognition procedures, different ways of e-learning provision and types of providers that can result in different probabilities of recognition. In the current situation, we could identify similarities between the implementation of recognition in mobility programs and now e-learning. Recognition of competencies and ECTS from outside of the home HEI is highly dependent on trust that needs to be strategically built and supported. Using practices that were proven to be successful in implementing recognition within mobility programs can be used as a starting point.

Information dissemination and advocacy in regard to recognition of e-learning are essential for students, student boards, teaching staff, HEI management, e-learning providers and policy making bodies. Guides for various of these groups can be found here including a guide specifically designed to inform students and student representatives.

*Don't discriminate against the international students*. As traveling has been affected all around the world, obviously international students have been unable to travel for their studies. We have seen international study programs and visa procedures suspended, international students sent to their home countries in the middle of their studies, discrimination against international students from certain countries. In no acceptable manner the excuse of the pandemic shall be used to suspend education, with no reason certain students should be discriminated against because of their country of origin. The countries in Europe apply the necessary procedures of testing and social distancing, and these can be

easily made available to the international students who have worked hard, prepared for and been selected to pursue their international degrees in an international country. Universities and governments should be in regular contact with the embassies in third countries and notify them about priority of supporting international student visas with zero discrimination. Online learning should be used as an alternative for international students until the airline flights make it possible for them to travel.

*Don't call internationalization at home a virtual mobility*. Following the topic discussed above, we see an expanding growth of internationalization at home being labeled as ''virtual mobility''. Physical mobility is a complex experience for students that includes aspects beyond the exchange of learning materials and academic knowledge at the host university. We understand that these days sometimes circumstances may not permit physical mobility, but first, as reiterated above, the institutions and governments should do their utmost best to make physical mobilities possible, and second - internationalization at home experiences shouldn't be called international mobilities for in reality they are not.

*Prepare your support services*.  Remember that the young people you work with at the universities are learners. Besides all the academic knowledge, students at universities also learn to cope with challenges in life which they often also meet at the university. And as this time is undoubtedly challenging, support services provided at the universities must work at their best. Areas such as mental health support, career guidance, international student support, mentoring, etc shall be on the priority of the to-do list of universities.

Actions of higher education decision makers can go far beyond the recommendations highlighted here, but we believe these are essential points to underline and without these considerations the quality learning experience of students is under a threat. We encourage regular open discussions about the different needs of student population in an e-learning/blended learning environment to ensure that students are supported accordingly throughout these challenging times.