

YERUN Seminar on COVID-19

15 June 2020

– Background –

On 15 June, YERUN organised a seminar for its members on the impact of COVID-19 on the following topics: Teaching Staff and Digital Education; Student support; and Campus Management. These themes were chosen after an informal consultation with members carried out by the YERUN Brussels office. This initiative was preceded by a series of roundtables among colleagues from members on specific key topics that had been challenged or affected by this crisis (namely: international students and online teaching, research collaborations and sport facilities). The seminar therefore completed the exchanges among YERUN members on the crucial challenges emerging from the so-called “Corona crisis” and to share experiences on actions implemented, lessons learnt and possible ways forward.

The meeting was attended by 53 participants, who were divided into three virtual breakout rooms. A summary of the key aspects discussed on the three themes is presented below. An agenda of the meeting can be found [here](#). This event contributes to the finalisation of the YERUN Paper on possible scenarios post COVID-19 that will be published by the network by the end of June 2020.

– Key takeaways from the three parallel sessions –

Teaching Staff & Digital Education

- Positive atmosphere: let's **use the challenge and shape the future**
- Don't forget the **human aspect** in online teaching
- Consider **inclusivity** in terms of:
 - access for students and staff
 - infrastructure
 - combining work and family duties
- Hybrid teaching in high quality is cost-intensive
- New collaborations across departments are emerging

Student Support

- **Student support** is here to stay
- Strategic **involvement** of students in peer-to-peer activities
- **Communication** is key
- More investment needed in:
 - staff training
 - ensuring equity
 - ensuring good digital infrastructures

Campus Management

- *“Closing the campus was quite easy, opening up is more complicated”*
- Available **levels of operational protection** will allow **flexibility** and **direction** to face the next period.
 - Protocols, guidelines and measures on: staff-students safety, social distancing measures, protective equipment, % physical presence allowed, monitoring of parameters (temperature, ventilation), rooms capacity, planning for extra spaces availability, support measures for caring responsibilities of staff, etc.
- **Governance** during COVID-19. Importance of **Communication**. Possible **scenarios**.
- **Increased inequalities** - further issues that will emerge (unemployment, next generation of ECRs).

– Summaries from the three parallel sessions –

Session on Teaching Staff/Digital Education ([Recording available](#))

Four speakers from YERUN members shared their experiences the needs of Teaching Staff during the transition to digital education in the past three months:

- **Prof. Mark Brown**, Director National Institute for Digital Learning ([NIDL](#)), Dublin City University. [Digital Education – Leveraging new learning futures.](#)
- **Prof. Madeleine Eacott**, Pro Vice Chancellor of Education, University of Essex.
- **Dr. Susanna Kohonen**, Lecturer at Language Centre, University of Eastern Finland. [Learning Online – Learning Face-to-Face.](#)
- **Elsa Caetano**, Educational Technologist & Instructional Designer at NOVA Doctoral School, NOVA University Lisbon. [Remote Emergency Teaching.](#)

Dublin City University (Prof. Mark Brown)

DCU is the leading institution for digital education in Ireland. Therefore, when the pandemic broke out, they were really active not just in supporting their own students and staff, but more generally in Ireland and beyond. They developed a comprehensive online [course](#) on **how to teach online**, in partnership with the 'FutureLearn' platform, which counted more than 50,000 registrations from 138 countries. At DCU, they went through three phases: 1) get quickly online; 2) get organised to develop appropriate alternative assessments; 3) get thinking about future scenarios.

[Five lessons](#) can be drawn from DCU's experience with quickly switching to online learning:

- First of all, online teaching was often viewed as a poor substitute for campus-based teaching when in fact the research evidence does not show that mode delivery is a key factor in the quality of education.
- Secondly, synchronised teaching in online delivery tended to replicate face-to-face delivery whereas more emphasis needed to be placed on asynchronised teaching.
- Thirdly, attention needs to be paid to the role of emotions and to the affective dimension of teaching and learning.
- Fourth, organisational culture is crucial (the predisposition to online education at DCU was important to make it successful);
- Fifth: the emergence of a hybrid model is positioning DCU with a futures-focused scenario, bringing together formal, informal, physical and virtual elements.

Learning how to be an effective learner is in itself an important outcome. Therefore, DCU is developing an online course to help prepare students for hybrid education model. The university is also looking into what could be done beyond formal degrees. In February, they launched their first **Micro-credentials** in the area of [FinTech](#) and this is something that is going to gain more and more importance in the transition post COVID-19, in order to get people back into employment. Short courses with a credit bearing element have a great potentiality.

Further readings: [The new digital university: Reflections on a week that changed Irish HE](#), M. Brown; [A global outlook to the interruption of education due to COVID-19 Pandemic: Navigating in a time of uncertainty and crisis](#), Asian Journal of Distance Learning.

University of Essex (Prof. Madeleine Eacott)

University of Essex aims to go back to providing on-campus education in a safe and secure way for the next academic year, via a **blended approach**. This means that for large groups of students, teaching will be moved online, but other teaching events will be delivered on-campus with appropriate distancing measures. However, a high degree of flexibility will be given to those students who cannot attend in

person, by making sure that every element of the teaching is also available online. University of Essex had goals for online curriculum development well before the pandemic: integrating virtual elements, adopting flipping classes, moving assessments away from closed books were all things present in their strategic planning. The pandemic has simply pushed these changes faster and further. There are three key things that have been taken into account:

- **Planning for curriculum development and delivery for 2020-2021:** a joint delivery approach was launched in March. An introduction to webinars on Zoom and one to teaching online on Zoom were immediately organized, attracting 613 and 539 participants respectively in the first two months. In May, the annual educational conference was organised around the theme of digital education, with the participation of dr. Erkkö Suomo from University of Eastern Finland. In order to help teachers deliver their content, everyone was involved ('Essex Spirit'): expertise from drama colleagues, peer-review system of teaching delivery, network of colleagues to share their experience (college of experts).
- **Thinking beyond the delivery of the curriculum,** to focus on student support from a staff perspective. Especially the upcoming cohort of students will be in need of special support.
- **Living a useful legacy of this current situation:** this time next year, we will look back at 2020-2021 and find that we have learnt new skills and ways of doing things that we would like to keep and develop further. We are all learning and growing through this pandemic.

University of Eastern Finland (*Dr. Susanna Kohonen*)

The university incorporated blended teaching years ago ([Flipped Learning Project](#)). When talking about online education, the **student experience** has to be the starting point. It is crucial to bring back the human experience in our online plans. Whether we talk about blended or fully online education, we have to take into account:

- **Communication:** Be consistent and choose one platform. It is important to provide a clear picture of what will happen, in what order, how, when and who is involved.
- **Engagement:** It is essential to foresee how students will be engaged in the learning process and with the overall learning community. Important to adapt methods according to group size.
- **Interaction:** Have clear plans on the activities, who will be involved, and how. Very often, less is more. Visual content and lay-out are also something to consider carefully.

As an educator it is important to focus on the aims and how to achieve them, the role of assessment and the role of feedback. Design meaningful, participatory elements into your courses to enhance students' engagement and to build community spirit.

NOVA University Lisbon (*Elsa Caetano*)

Focus on 'Emergency Remote Teaching', which is different than "Online teaching". This means that during the lockdown lessons were quickly moved online, through Zoom. Different approaches to ensure support to faculty members and students:

- 1) **Analysis and Dissemination:** In order to assess what the needs were, the NOVA Pedagogical Innovation Unit worked closely with the Pedagogical Board of every faculty. Then, information was disseminated about the tools available. Customised responses were given to professors and a group of practice sharing was set up.
- 2) **Training** (in the framework of the NOVA Doctoral School): training courses for PhD candidates and supervisors were adapted to an online format. Understand and give on the job, shoulder to shoulder training on specific needs to NOCA Doctoral School teaching staff.

This made it possible to give courses also to those who were not in Portugal. For the future, at NOVA they will have a dual delivery mode: in-person and online, with a rotative system. The next step is to facilitate the teaching staff job, with better broadcasting infrastructure, and a group of experts (Educational Technologists) to continue giving support to each faculty, helping teachers find the most effective way to transform their contents, ensuring the quality of education.

Session on Student Support ([Recording available](#))

The Roundtable was aimed to discuss initiatives and projects currently run at YERUN members to best support students during the unprecedented circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Three presentations were showcased during the presentation:

- **Liesbeth Mouha**, Psychologist & Project leader for Student Wellbeing at **Maastricht University**. [UM Students Wellbeing Projects 2019-2024](#)
- **Chiara Tranquilli**, Head of International Students Recruitment at **Tor Vergata University of Rome**. [Virgilio Project](#)
- **Prof. Bill Leahy**, Vice-Provost for Students, Staff and Civic Engagement at **Brunel University London**. [Brunel University's response to COVID-19](#)

Maastricht University (*Liesbeth Mouha*)

In 2018, encouraged by the strong focus on student wellbeing in the media and among students, the university set up 5 students wellbeing projects for the years (2019-2024):

1. **[Caring Universities Project](#)**: this project consists in a questionnaire on student's wellbeing and related online modules. All students are requested to take the questionnaire and this allows a) the university to gather important data on students' wellbeing and b) students to assess themselves, see how they are doing and, if their score shows that they might have wellbeing issues (green, orange or red dot), they are automatically redirected to online modules and other preventive resources that they can consult, if they want. The projects will be launched shortly.
2. **[Wellbeing Movement Project](#)**: "[Wellbeing Week](#)" has been running since 2017, and it consists of workshops, lectures, talks around the topic of wellbeing, while the "Wellbeing Wednesdays" were launched last year to raise awareness throughout the entire year, each Wednesday on a certain wellbeing topic. For now, it is only some staff members and some students offering these workshops, but the next step is to make this a real movement coming from students for students. --> *moved online after Coronavirus, few physical workshops might be organised in a physical offer if the situation allows it.*
3. **[Peer Support Project](#)**: so far started at two faculties, this project is aimed to train students to become peer-supporters (not intended to be counselling or therapeutic sessions, but just being a support to each other). --> *Facebook live chat, daily students can chat with student team members, students are continuing to be trained online (higher demand from students who want to help).*
4. **Staff Support System**: aimed to support staff to better support students. Modules and workshops have been created for them. --> *online sessions, shorter online modules and videos for staff members, highly demanded by staff members.*
5. **Waiting Times Project**: Aimed to reduce the waiting time to receive psychological support (usually 20 working days) by providing a "Quick Psychological Referral (QPR)" whereby students can receive a 10 minutes quick consultations where they can ask their major questions and be directed to the carer that best fits their needs. Workshops on specific wellbeing topics are integrated and online resources have been created. --> *provided online via LifeSize and Surf.*

For all these projects, the University foresees a **blended offer**, so as to give students the choice to receive support in person or from the comfort of their homes. Concerning the impact of COVID-19 on students, opinions diverge, results from the Caring Universities survey will provide clearer data.

Rome Tor Vergata University (*Chiara Tranquilli*)

Inspired by the Poet Virgilio accompanying Dante through Hell in the Divina Commedia, the [Virgilio project](#) aims to guide students in these hard times. The idea came up in January, when a group of talented students of the School of Economics proposed to the International Relations Office to support

international students arriving in September. But then, COVID-19 happened and they decided to move this support in an online format, via 'Teams' platform. Twice a week, for one and a half hour, first 45 minutes is dedicated to general speech and remaining 45 minutes to specific topics (accommodation, visas, etc).

Many offices very involved in the project: the Recruitment Office, the Welcome Office, the Programme Office as well as many volunteers (students of the 1st and 2nd year of Economics and School of Engineering). The team is composed by 3 volunteers, 1 staff member and 12 prospective students.

In terms of results, it has been noted that volunteering students are happy to do something different from lectures), they feel involved, the interaction between students is very high. Prospective students feel accompanied, they get the answers to the questions they have. This is also a good system to fight fake news that were going around about Italy and the Coronavirus. In a nutshell, this can be a new tool for the future that the university wants to continue using.

Brunel University London (*Prof. William Leahy*)

Students' mental health has been a big issue in the UK for a number of years now, therefore most universities were already equipped with student support schemes. Following the COVID-19 crisis, while moving to a "Dual Delivery" mode of teaching, a number of initiatives have been taken at Brunel, adding to already existing ones:

- **Equality Impact Assessment**, aimed to get a better understanding of the inequalities that these new ways of teaching might highlight (such as digital poverty, inadequate study spaces, or concerns for students coming from BAME¹ backgrounds). This means working on how to provide technology to those who need it: many students do not have facilities and technologies at their disposal. This is particularly true for students coming from a widening participation background, which at Brunel represent about 70% of the total number of students (15,000), and who not always have the support they need. During May and June all exams were moved online and now students are asked what issues they had using the online assessment. The survey is currently ongoing.
- **Better online Mental Health & Well Being Resources**. Already before the COVID-19 pandemic, these resources were moved online in order to better enable students to take care of themselves ("Self Care"). A large suite of modules was developed, with courses on study skills, which are being very popular among students. The BAME community was hit harder by the pandemic, moreover the Black Lives Matter is having a specific impact on the black community of students, therefore Brunel is very alert on issues related to racism. Special provisions on mental health have been taken for PhD students.
- **Staff Training**: staff upskilling in students services. The university is assuming that there will be an increase in isolations, grief/bereavement, anxiety over the potential for a second wave and other COVID-19 specific issues.
- **Induction/Welcome Week**: this initiative is meant to make the transition to university as smooth as possible. The "Big hello" initiative has been going on for a couple of years, allowing prospective students to meet current students and this year will be held online.
- **Work with Development centre** on students leaving university and looking for a job.

¹ Black, Asian and Minority ethnic.

Session on Campus Management ([Recording available](#))

Both speakers in this session are from institutions opening up their campuses as of mid-June 2020 under special provisions (University of Konstanz opens on 16 June and University of Eastern Finland on 17 June). Their provisions for this reopening are thought to be of relevance for colleagues that are planning their re-opening at a later stage this year (around September 2020).

- **Prof. Dr. Silvia Mergenthal**, Vice Rector for International Affairs and Equal Opportunities, University of Konstanz: [Limited On-Site Operations at the University of Konstanz during summer term 2020](#).
- **Tuomo Meriläinen**, Director of Administration, University of Eastern Finland: [UEF's response to COVID-19](#).

The following key topics were addressed and discussed during the session: Institutions are working based on **scenarios** of possible events and preparing action plans for each situation. This allows institutions to develop “**levels of operational protection**” or “**stages**” with clear instructions and guidelines to operate their institutions under safe conditions. In some cases, these levels of protection are taken in collaboration with the governmental guidelines, while in other countries, particularly where governments took security decisions at a later stage, institutions are taking these decisions autonomously. In all institutions, safety comes first.

Governance

- Even before the closure of the campuses, available units on **Pandemics and Taskforce Crisis** met daily or several times a week to assess the situation, inform and advise the rectorates or presidents (several institutions took preventive measures and closure of campuses before their governments took the decision). Decisions were kept at the rectorate/president level. In some institutions, this represented a change in the consultative, and potentially also in the decision-making, processes. Keeping everyone informed with **early communication**, having dedicated section on the website, specific email address, and twitter hashtags alongside with regular presence from leadership is considered very important.
- At the moment, there are **risk assessment teams** or units established in faculties.
- Special **provisions on security** depend on how the campuses are distributed: one single campus vs different campuses. There are indications for access and exit via dedicated points (at campus, building and room levels), social distancing measures, hand hygiene and mouth protection (when distancing cannot be guaranteed), taped markings on distance, access regulation, time slots.
- **Assessment of available infrastructure** capacity: ranges from 20-30% to 50% depending on the shape of the rooms but also the national situation and guidelines regarding the management of COVID-19 in each country. Assessment of ventilation systems.
- Support **measures for families** or for staff with caring responsibilities.
- Given the limitations on physical capacity that can ensure security measures, institutions are **rethinking the structure of their campuses** and the redistribution and repurposing of spaces and rooms (e.g. some staff offices could turn into seminar rooms, other institutions are partnering with governmental buildings underused).
- There is an immediate increase in the **expenses** of the security, safety provisions and logistics required but that is compensated with other budget provisions not spent at the moment (events organization, travels). Still time needed to determine the aspects of the institution that will be most affected financially (e.g. student housing, sport centers have been among the first hurt for some).

Organisation of students:

- Only a **limited set** of classes requiring laboratory work, seminars or special courses will be taught face to face, following distance and hygiene protocols.
- A **majority** of courses will continue **online** with established alternative online assessments.
- Some institutions are opening up spaces for students to work on campus (following safety measures) being aware that not all students have optimal conditions to study at home (e.g. libraries, sport facilities).
- **Increased follow up** with students' representatives and follow up from teachers as students are having issues with mental health.
- Outgoing student mobility is not cancelled but students are required to book travels with **cancellation policies**.
- **International students: flexibility** on the physical exchange stay depending of the situation. Online provisions guaranteed. Having clear indications of the available offer to international students (small scale activities to be organized on-site) and plans on what will happen regarding the overall management of COVID-19 gives reassurance to students and is influencing positively in keeping the number of applications up.
- Institutions are trying to **assess** the number of students that will be present on campus and based on that prepare a set of **on-site activities** of social engagement under protective measures. There might be an increase in activities offered outdoors. For campuses with students' residences and with some capacity even during lockdown, facilities have been opened or kept open (e.g. groceries, basic shopping) at every time following the security measures imposed.

Organisation of staff:

- Recommendations for travelling abroad for working purposes (in general, not recommended until the end of the year – subject to changes in the COVID-19 overall situation).
- Working **remotely** continues being the preferred option although presence in campus is allowed with restrictions.
- Staff being positive towards use of ICT and digital tools for communication, especially team or admin meetings. Some things will remain after this period although people reported the need for social contact too.
- Some institutions are undertaking **well-being surveys** to staff. Important is to ensure appropriate mechanisms for a good dialogue with staff in the coming months to understand deeply the consequences and the challenges of the changes suffered from this period.
- Ongoing discussions with staff and teachers to prepare the next academic year: **flexibility** and keeping **safety** first in mind is a constant for institutions. Depending on national contexts, the adaptability of staff to the continuation of full digital teaching is different. Allowing staff to get extra time for preparing their online materials is seen of added value. **Guidance** and training on this aspect is needed (see session on Teaching Staff- Digital Education).
- Ongoing discussions and **assessment with staff** to plan the next academic year based on different scenarios: hybrid model of teaching (some onsite others online at the same time), blended education (online content plus rotative system for onsite activities).
- The current experience and move to online teaching has made institutions evaluate and assess that some activities might well be organized online even when the situation with COVID-19 is resolved, while it has helped to **prioritise** the **activities** that require a physical interaction, being that due to the content taught, the nature of the activity or the social interactions needed.