



WORKSHOP REPORT

WORKSHOP: EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES OF DIGITALISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION:

Lessons learnt from the Pandemic. 15 June 2021.

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Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences
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Experiences and Challenges of Digitalisation in Higher Education:

Lessons learnt from the Pandemic

15 June 2021, 13.00 – 16.00

Programme

13.00-13.30

Welcome Message by Prof. Martin Benkenstein, Dean of the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences

Introduction into the agenda by Prof. Jörn Dosch, Vice Dean of the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences

Short Round of Introductions

13.30-14.45 Discussion Round 1 (Groups & Plenary): Online Teaching

- What are the experiences, challenges and lessons learnt?
- Which elements of digital learning & teaching should be kept once we return to classroom teaching and what did not work at all?
- How have students and teaching staff coped with the lack of face-to-face interaction?
- What are the experiences in conducting digital examinations?
- Has the introduction of online formats during the pandemic sped up the process of digitalisation in higher education?
- What are the best practices of digitalisation?

14.45-15.00 Break

15.00-16.00 Discussion Round 2 (Groups & Plenary): Digitalisation and Internationalisation

- How has the shift to digital formats in learning & teaching and research affected international partnership, collaboration and mobilities?
- How can we use digital formats of learning & teaching to foster internationalisation? For example, would it be feasible to create digital learning & teaching networks with the participation of several universities in which resources and content is shared? Would there be scope for joint or double degrees delivered mainly digitally?

Introduction
Dr. Ana Lucía Salinas de Dosch

A warm welcome to all of you and thank you for your interest and participation in this event. I am the coordinator of internationalisation at the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences at the University of Rostock. First of all, I would like to introduce the senior management team of the Faculty: The Dean, Prof. Benkenstein, the Dean for Student Affairs Prof. Göbel and the Vice-Dean of internationalisation, Prof. Dosch.

Two years ago we probably could not have imagined that we would be sitting here today in a virtual room, discussing how the Corona virus pandemic has changed our lives, our jobs and especially the way we do things. This Pandemic has caused widespread disruption to education and training provision in higher education institutions. At the same time this crisis has shown that the use of distance and online learning is essential to ensuring the continuity of education and training provision.

We are now in the third semester of online teaching at most universities. We have gained a lot of experience and yet we are still facing an incredible amount of challenges and unanswered questions. For instance, how to develop a digitalisation strategy that fits the objectives of a particular university in a post-Covid world?

Therefore, we thought that today is an excellent opportunity to share our experiences, to look at things that worked or went well and of course to discuss aspects that went less well or perhaps even didn't work. This exchange of experiences and best practices will help us to take stock of one and half years of learning and teaching under Corona conditions, but also to think ahead and identify those elements of our digital journey that improve the provision of degree programmes in the long run.

Welcome Remarks

Prof. Martin Benkenstein

Dear colleagues, dear guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to send a warm welcome to the participants of our workshop on „Experiences and Challenges in Higher Education: Lessons Learnt from the Pandemic “. My name is Martin Benkenstein and I'm the dean of the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences at the University of Rostock.

The pandemic, our workshop topic, hindered you to come to Rostock. That's of course a mess, because Rostock is a wonderful city next to the Baltic Sea and the University was founded in 1419 and therefore it is the eldest in Northern Europe. So it is always a good idea to visit Rostock. But organizing this workshop via zoom is also an opportunity. And therefore, I welcome not only guests from Germany and other European countries, but also from East Asia. Your welcome! We are really happy that you all are part of our workshop.

I have to thank Jörn Dosch, my Vice Dean, responsible for international affairs of our faculty and Ana Lucia Salinas de Dosch, our coordinator for internationalization for their engagement and all their efforts organizing this workshop. They did a great job and made it possible, that we are here in this zoom meeting.

You will have two relevant discussion panels. The first one is on online teaching, a topic I have already discussed in various meeting, with colleagues, with other faculty deans, with our president and so on. We are really interested in your sight on this topic. The second discussion round is on Digitalization and Internationalisation. This topic is - in my opinion - heavily underdiscussed. And therefore, we are look forward to this discussion topic with very special interest.

For myself I see three stages coping with corona. The first stage was the problem-stage in the summer term last year. We had a lot of not only technical problems to organize our lectures and our research. In the winter term and up to now we began to realize that we have to understand these problems as challenges. And I believe that in the meantime we are able to cope with these challenges. Actually, and for the future I hope that we can make opportunities out of the challenges. And maybe this workshop is one step on the long way to accept the pandemic crisis not only as a crisis, but also as an opportunity in academic education and research.

Therefore, I wish you an extremely interesting afternoon, surprising insights and a handful ideas to create new opportunities out of corona.

Have a good time together and thank you for your attention!

Introductory Remarks

Prof. Jörn Dosch

The Covid-19 Pandemic has created substantial challenges for universities worldwide but also opportunities. Obviously, the former have presented themselves more directly and clearly than the latter. Most universities switched to online teaching in a matter of a few weeks without, however, having the necessary infrastructure in place. At least this is what anecdotal evidence from many colleagues in Germany suggests. Only a short while ago digitalisation was often considered more a goal than a necessity, “something for the future” or at best an add-on but not an essential element in the process of delivering degree programmes and strengthening research. The needs and demands of virtual teaching during the pandemic radically changed this approach. Sure enough, lecturers and students alike needed time to adapt, find the most suitable format for the delivery of digital content, clarify data protection and copyright issues and so on. Probably among the most challenging issue was the question of how to deal with exams. The pandemic is far from over and it is likely to take a while until we can return to normality. But how will this new post-Corona reality look like? Digital learning is now well established and tested. While classroom teaching, face-to-face interaction with students and simply being physically on a campus are what university is all about, online format are here to stay to supplement our traditional pre-Corona methods. Blended learning – the combination of classroom and online teaching - has become the new catchword that will define the way we approach higher education from now on. Some universities in the UK – and maybe elsewhere as well – have already started to offer degree new degree programmes based on blending learning approaches – not out of necessity but choice.

Today we will share our manifold experiences in the process of enhancing the digital learning environment during the pandemic and discuss the lessons learnt and the way forward for digitalisation in higher education. Welcome (virtually) to Rostock!



Reflections

Prof. Stefan Göbel

The workshop "Experiences and Challenges of Digitisation in Higher Education: Lessons learnt from the Pandemic" was, in my view, an opportunity to take stock of the situation a good year after the start of the restrictions on university teaching due to the Corona pandemic. The fact that many saw it that way was evident from the large response and number of participants. Therefore, as Dean of Studies of the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, I am very pleased that this workshop was organised out of our project "Living Internationality". The lively discussion in which I was able to participate showed that important questions were addressed in the workshop. For me, as Dean of Studies, the focus was on the first part of the workshop, in which experiences about online teaching were exchanged, as I see this as having a great influence on the way we will teach at our faculty in the short to medium term. Nevertheless, the question of what influence digitalisation can have on internationalisation in higher education naturally also offers exciting perspectives.

From my point of view, the discussion revealed very different ways of dealing with the challenges, especially in the area of examinations. While there were hardly any online exams at our faculty, there were definitely reports on how such forms of examination can succeed. On the other hand, almost everyone agreed that there has been an enormous push in digitisation at the level of the academic teacher, as everyone has been forced to deal with how to present their teaching content online. In my view, this will also lead to a mix of digital and analogue teaching in the future.

I found agreement that it is too early to answer the question of what are the best practices of digitisation. However, there was agreement that it has become clear how important a digitisation strategy is for the respective university and how far it has come in implementing it. With regard to this aspect, the pandemic acted like a burning glass that ruthlessly exposed the weaknesses of existing digitisation strategies.

Overall, I found the workshop very enriching because we took the time to reflect on what we had achieved so far. In particular, the international exchange was an important aspect. I would be happy if the workshop resulted in many contacts that also lead to further international cooperation, and I congratulate the organisers on this very successful event.

What are the experiences, challenges and lessons learnt?

The pandemic caught us off guard and tested our ability to improvise, adapt and learn in record time how to use different digital resources.

Everyone was confronted with different challenges and these are some of the comments shared by the participants:

- Among the many challenges that many of us had to face was the fact that we were confronted with a digital revolution, that challenged even those who were “tech savvy”.
- Another challenging aspect was the pedagogical approach, especially when it came to plan interactive parts. In addition to the knowledge, it was clear that the students needed to acquire new competences.
- The non-personal form of teaching was not only challenging for the lectures but also for the students, who sometimes were reluctant to engage in discussions in the virtual rooms.
- “I learnt a lot about new technology and also about myself”. The first was not easy, I was very frustrated.
- Flexibility was essential and a key factor when teaching online.
- With the hope that pandemic will be a once in a lifetime experience, we have to see that in the future we implement procedures that allow us to do be efficient in assignments.

In relation of Infrastructure and the use of internet, there were some visible problems to deal with:

- Some lectures had to shorten the delivery time and in some cases they needed to make use of pre-record lectures. This had the advantage that the students had more time to deal with the content at their own pace, and feedback also showed that students learned more effectively when they did not experience extensive screen time.

The elements of digital learning that worked very well and maybe can be used or kept in classroom teaching are as follows:

- Most of the colleagues made good experiences with zoom video conferences, especially for guest lectures, oral examinations, meetings, etc.
- Experience has shown that although personal contact cannot be replaced, it is possible to streamline processes using digital resources. For example, events that do not require staff travel, such as guest lectures, digital meetings, seminars that can be shared with colleagues from other universities and a number of other activities can be carried out in a digital format.
- Another use of this digital resources could be to maintain the ability to stream courses live to give students more flexible ways to participate in courses.

- Lectures for large groups of students could also be delivered in online formats. The same applied for some courses for international students.
- Video conferences can also be beneficial in cases of students due to unforeseen circumstances are not able to attend a lecture personally. Or when the teacher cannot hold his lecture personally.
- However, all of this implies that a code of practice is necessary and has to be put in place, in order to regulate student's participation in video conferences, such as switching on cameras and being responsive.

It is necessary to have a look at the way that students and lecturers have coped with the lack of face-to-face interaction:

- The main challenges for most of the lecturers were related to the fact that many students opted for not switching on the cameras and some cases not showing any sign of reaction or even presence, which resulted in lecturers talking to black screens. As a participant put it: "Sometimes I had the feeling of being a TV commentator". Other lecturers felt that it was difficult to switch to this kind of format and they had the feeling that they could not reach the students in the way they wished. They also got the impression that the year of online teaching was a "lost year" for the students – not only in the sense of losing out on academic achievements but also university life in general and in terms of social contacts.
- In addition, a lot of extra work was required to reach the students per E-mail: either to track them or provide them with detailed feedback which otherwise would have been given verbally.
- This kind of format also represented a huge challenge when facing examinations. Ingenuity, trust, empathy and adaptability were the key factors in facing this challenge. In some cases, especially for the first year students, online examinations were an advantage, because they represented an easy way to get good marks. Digital examinations proved successful in case of oral examinations or online essays, but did not work equally well for example in the case of language exams. Students often simply read their presentations, and ingenuity was the key to adapt all oral exams to make sure there was enough time for spontaneous questions, in order to allow the lecturers to examine the students in an accurate way. In countries where internet connection is not reliable, the lecturers had to solve the problem by allowing a take-home, open-book exam (essays with two or three questions) and they had to rely on the trust and the good faith of the students.

It is necessary to evaluate the introduction of online formats during the pandemic sped up the process of digitalisation in Higher Education.

- It is undeniable to ascertain that the introduction of online formats has changed the way we perceive digitalisation and, for that matter, the way we do things now. However, there are many aspects that need to be improved, starting with the provision of adequate materials to every student, staff and lecturers. Now that we got the incentive work with digital format we need to get fully familiar with them. It is also crucial to develop (or improve) digitalisation strategies.
- Nowadays a lot of discussion, training, strategies, etc. exists regarding digitalisation. To be familiar with these new tools is of utmost importance. Indeed, becoming literate in digitalisation does not just mean learning the use of tools, but also to look at realities of life with greater lucidity and using digitalisation and the new "know-how" for the greater good of students.
- It is also a reality that some lecturers will need time to incorporate this "know-how" into their teaching and another major problem is the fact that digitalisation remains misunderstood. There is a risk of seeing digitalisation as the magic solution to all problems. As a colleague put it: "a bad analog process remains bad even when digitalised".

After all the experience gained and challenges faced, many questions remain about how has the shift to digital formats in learning & teaching and research affected international partnerships, collaboration and mobilities?

- Digitalisation may have the ability to speed up and facilitate more and more international cooperation, especially with partners who are geographical distant, for instance Indonesia, but students need to know the rules of game that international programmes require certain commitment.
- Digitalisation has helped to develop new platforms of communication and thus improved and expanded opportunities for international collaboration.

If we consider that the use of digital formats for learning & teaching can foster internationalisation, would it be feasible, for example to create digital learning & teaching networks with the participation of several universities which share resources and content?

- More and more we see the large scope of benefits of digitalisation in internationalisation. International seminars or meetings with student groups have become easier and it will be an additional feature in future cooperation.
- Virtual meetings enable us to bring more people together, people from around the world are able to see each other more often. However, this is unlikely to ever replace personal, face-to-face contacts.

If digitalisation facilitates international cooperation, would there be scope for joint or double degrees delivered mainly digitally?

- Even though digitalisation opens many doors in relation to international cooperation, there is still a lot of scepticism among many lecturers who do not think that joint degrees entirely delivered in digital formats will be feasible and desirable.
- The essence of a double degree is not only knowledge, but also being able to experience the culture and the people of another country. This cannot be done online; digital tools cannot replace personal experiences. Certainly, online communication can help, but we have to ask ourselves if digital degrees or digital universities reflect our concept of higher education.
- It is clear that these and many other questions remain unanswered for the time being, but it is also true that digitalisation and the way universities using the existing opportunities will from now on play an important part in the delivery of degree programmes
- Higher education needs to create sound strategies that allow both students and teachers to benefit from an instrument that can achieve development and above all inclusion.