Recommendations for developing the European Education Area

The Guild
of European Research-Intensive Universities

Recommendations for developing the European Education Area

Introduction

Higher education is experiencing profound change, as new technologies, pedagogies and demands from students and employers on the attributes of university graduates have considerable implications on teaching and learning. The experience of change has been highlighted by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has heightened our sense of what digital transformations are possible, and what their short and long-term effects are. Against this background, The Guild welcomes the initiative to establish the European Education Area (EEA), that will address how higher education institutions can be strengthened in teaching and learning at a European level.

It is important to use the potential and the steep learning curve experienced during the Covid-19 crisis to improve the way we teach and learn in the future. Whilst the decision on the choice of pedagogy must remain within the university, cooperation between universities offers an opportunity to learn from each other, share resources, and develop common standards. This is why we strongly support the European Commission's ambition to further develop the EEA and increase the quality and competitiveness of European universities globally. Indeed, the relevance of transnational collaboration in education has been spearheaded by the European Universities initiative offering a unique framework to experiment with innovative approaches to pedagogy, mobility and university cooperation. And these approaches will enrich not only the EEA but can also inspire the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

An ambitious EEA needs to reflect on how the Covid-19 crisis has affected academic life at its core, including on-campus interaction between students and teachers, and their free movement across borders. The crisis has

affected especially students who are in a socially disadvantaged position, and any lessons we derive from the crisis must enhance our inclusiveness as institutions.

Whilst welcoming opportunities for change, we note the risk that study programmes become supercharged with demands to deepen subject knowledge, enhance transferable skills and strengthen citizenship skills, while at the same time being mindful of student and staff wellbeing. The need for pedagogical innovation should not compromise the fundamental mission of universities: providing deep subject knowledge, and stimulating enquiring minds, based on excellence in teaching and research.

Research-intensive universities have rich experience in developing new approaches to teaching and learning, in light of changing methods and circumstances. Drawing upon this experience, we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the future of universities' education mission, and provide the following reflections on specific elements of the EEA.

1. New pedagogical approaches

The changing nature of the student body and learning needs, the availability of digital technology and the growing focus on student employability have encouraged universities to embrace new pedagogical approaches (e.g. online learning, challenged-based learning, active learning). In the aftermath of the crisis, we recognize a temptation for policy-makers to push for digital learning as a solution in and of itself, that can save costs. However, in this crisis digital education has also showed its limitations. Instead of promoting a particular pedagogical practice, we encourage the

introduction of innovative pedagogies based on evidence of their positive effects on learning outcomes, building on digitalisation as a means to an end, not as an end in itself.

Online and blended learning

The quantum leap into digital education has provided a solution during the Covid-19 crisis. Teachers and students have worked extraordinarily hard and have showed remarkable resilience and solidarity during the crisis. Still, the experience of The Guild members suggests that students expect an integrated learning experience which goes beyond online learning, making on-campus education the preferred choice for the majority of the students. Learning is a social experience and interaction among students and between students and teachers is a distinctive feature of any university experience. Yet, our notion of campus activity as the default one has been challenged. Rather than focusing on the benefits of physical versus online learning, we should support learning environments where the combination of carefully intertwined physical and online activities is shaped by an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of different pedagogies in the context of each course. There are successful examples of learning environments that provide students with virtual activities that are as intellectually engaging, and as challenging as any course offered on campus.[1] And it is the coherence of the learning experience that will attract students to pursue a university degree in the future, as compared to other education providers.

The rapid technological transformation will enable universities to reach broader segments of society by offering greater flexibility in study programmes, but at the same time it risks

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[1] See examples from the University of Tartu and Uppsala University: https://www.ht.ut.ee/en/admissions/educational-

technology-ma; https://www.uu.se/en/admissions/master/selma/program/?pKod=RRP2M&pInr=&lasar=19/20

possible exclusion of people with a disadvantaged background. Universities play an important role in engaging with their local communities and regions, which is why issues of digital literacy and digital poverty need to be addressed with particular care. Virtual learning and virtual mobilities should not be viewed as the second-best option available to primarily disadvantaged learners. For this reason, we encourage the Commission to target areas that most urgently need our support. Besides strengthening the Erasmus+ programme, other EU funding instruments should support overcoming the digital divide in our education systems.[2]

There are a number of areas where greater EU cooperation in providing online and blended learning can be beneficial. For example, universities would welcome the EU's support in harmonizing data ownership and privacy issues when using digital platforms owned by private providers. Also, support in purchasing licenses for various digital platforms and switching to digitally signed documentation could help universities in their digital transformation. Universities would also benefit from a common platform to share research on innovative pedagogy or to work on common guidelines for online assessment.

Challenge-based learning

The Guild welcomes the focus on interdisciplinarity in study programmes as a way to bring together high-level research and societal challenges and to expose students to collaborations with non-academic partners. Linking study programmes with the transition to the labour market should be done without compromising universities' core mission of educating independent-minded, critically thinking individuals with an excellent grounding in their subject, capable of deep analysis.

Although the current crisis has strengthened the challenge-based orientation in research and education, we emphasize that all learning is challenge-based. The value of universities lies in providing in-depth knowledge whilst taking advantage of a full range of learning and teaching practices, from lectures to more participatory approaches that encourage active student engagement.

Core disciplinary skills can be developed at the Bachelor level alongside enabling students to address problems from interdisciplinary perspectives. In this context, the joint efforts of European University alliances in designing interdisciplinary and transnational education programmes might produce valuable insights for the wider university sector.

Moreover, teachers, not only as facilitators of education but as reflective practitioners, should be enabled to identify the appropriate learning needs and strategies. In doing so, they must be supported through dedicated training and funding for pedagogical development.[3] Innovative pedagogies with proven value can only be translated into institutional policy through a long-term approach including sufficient funding and support for pedagogical training.

2. Rethinking internationalisation

Spending time abroad to study or train is one of the key objectives of the European

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[2] To that end, The Guild has proposed the creation of a research and innovation mission on 'Eradicating Europe's Digital Divides': https://www.the-guild.eu/publications/guild-mission-proposals.pdf

[3] See examples from Uppsala University and Université catholique de Louvain: https://teknat.uu.se/about-us/Educational+development/tuff/; https://oer.uclouvain.be//jspui/handle/20.500.12279/587

Education Area. Mobility is also one of the cornerstones of the European University alliances. The challenges related to public funding, increasing financial hardship among individuals, and travel restrictions accelerate the urgency of making mobility more sustainable and inclusive. This raises the question of how we can successfully combine the potential of distance learning with the benefits of physical mobility.

The Guild's members are committed to continuing and strengthening the physical exchange of students and staff members within accordance with national travel guidelines. At the same time, the ability of students to think across physical and virtual borders needs to be strengthened. For example, we expect a greater focus on internationalisation of curricula at home, the use of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) or webinars targeted to international staff members. Different types of blended mobility formats may become more common, for instance jointly taught virtual courses enhanced by physical joint activities across the cohort, possibly up to the level of the entire programme. European University alliances should offer a space to experiment with these new forms of internationalisation, along with cooperation projects supported by the Erasmus+ programme.

3. The role of universities in promoting lifelong learning

The Guild's members welcome the increased focus of policy-makers on universities' role in lifelong learning through short learning programmes. Flexible, customised learning paths with modular timetables might enable a wider group of learners to gain access to higher education.

However, clarity is needed on the division of roles and responsibilities of different actors in the ecosystem (higher education institutions,

public authorities and employers) that engage with the changing needs of the labour market. Many of the training and re-skilling needs can be met by other providers, and therefore universities should build on their particular strengths in teaching and learning, and focus on areas where there is a distinctive need for research-led education. Also, greater emphasis on the role of universities in lifelong learning should be coupled with adequate funding to fulfil this mission. The interest of engaging with micro-credits, that are often market-driven and target specific skills shortages, at the European level, needs to be carefully balanced with the in-depth knowledge and the holistic education offered by universities.

Besides the usual association of micro-credentials with developing postgraduate education, micro-credentials could also be sourced from the regular Bachelor's and Master's level teaching offer in order to target lifelong learners. In addition, micro-credentials could be used for staff development, so that university teachers and administrators could be provided with the necessary knowledge and skills (including learning foreign languages) to adapt to the challenges facing universities in the future

4. Incentives for pedagogical excellence

Innovative pedagogies have significant potential in circumstances where pedagogic work is acknowledged, supported and valued. Therefore, outstanding teaching contributions should be rewarded appropriately. Given the need to invest time and resources in both research and teaching in research-intensive universities, a stronger emphasis on teaching quality and pedagogical innovation can make a significant difference. However, efforts to strengthen research-led education should also come with investment in pedagogical skills and renewed recruitment and promotion practices

by rebalancing the education and research activities in the evaluation process. With regards to training, the shift to online teaching during the Covid-19 crisis has demonstrated the need for additional e-learning support from university services.

Given the ways in which research is changing through digital transformation, and the increasing emphasis on inter- and transdisciplinarity in approaching global challenges, there is a need to rethink and rearticulate the relationship between research and teaching, and how active learning can reflect this changing relationship. This is an important space for developing innovative pedagogies, but also for developing new courses and new ways of understanding. We support the use of European Universities as a framework for testing out such pedagogical innovation, noting that this requires room for failure, and subsequently sound quality assurance systems.

There is also potential for EU funding programmes to support and enhance pedagogical excellence, through competitive funding for new interdisciplinary courses or testing institutional models to teaching innovation.

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