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Raul Ranne is a Senior Advisor at ACA. He has more than 14 years of experience in higher education sector with a focus on internationalisation and development of education. He held various positions in the Archimedes Foundation – a national agency of the EU education, youth and sports programme, in Estonia. Over the years his key areas of responsibilities have included developing recognition of prior learning systems in Estonia, Study in Estonia programme aimed at marketing and branding of Estonia as a good destination for international students, and managing large number of mobility programmes, funded both from the EU and governmental sources. Raul also worked in the private sector, where he was responsible for the marketing and development of DreamApply, a leading Estonian EdTech company, before launching his own education consultancy company, Eduenable. Raul holds a master's degree in European Studies from Tallinn University, Estonia, and a qualification equal to Master's degree in political science from the University of Tartu, Estonia. [in](#)



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Angeliki is a Policy and Project Officer at the Academic Cooperation Association. She is also the co-chair of the ACA Thematic Peer Group "New Mobility Formats", discussing key transformations in physical mobility and their implications for programme design and the work of funding agencies. She has expertise in the higher education and vocational education and training sectors, with a focus on Erasmus+ project development and management. She has acquired on-the-ground experience with international students, having previously worked for the IRO of the University of Paris 8, managing the Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility programme. Inspired by her involvement in the project application for the European Reform University Alliance, she joined the Brussels scene, in an effort to contribute in a more direct manner to the Erasmus+ programme. In the recent years she has also been working in the private sector in a complementary capacity, mainly in evaluating EU funding applications in education and training and conducting research for relevant EU studies. Angeliki holds an advanced master's degree in International and European Relations from Linköpings University in Sweden. [in](#)

## Digitalisation in International Higher Education

From current challenges to what the future holds

*In present times, counting the effects the Covid-19 pandemic has had across the board, as well as in the higher education sector, digital transformations have gained new momentum and new scope. Even though, a topic debated for many years, the acceleration brought by Covid-19 proved to be a catalyst in terms of transforming distance learning into a new standard. As we hopefully step towards the end of the health crisis, it is imperative to continue these processes, recognising and fully materialising the potential of digital teaching and learning, not only as an emergency solution, but rather for its added value in connection to enhancing inclusion and strengthening international orientation.*

*Therefore, in alignment with the growing focus on digitalisation at both institutional and policy levels in Europe, ACA has decided to prioritise in 2022 learning more and supporting a dialogue about digitalisation in international higher education. To this end, following the successful run of ACA's "Think Pieces" series in 2020 on the world after Covid-19 and in 2021 on inclusion in the context of higher education, ACA is launching a new series of reflections this year, from thought leaders around Europe, exploring the multi-faceted nature of digitalisation in the higher education sector.*

*To set the stage for this ongoing series, this introductory piece, provides some context and frames the scope to the digital transition in international HE. We discuss the present-day realities in our sector, highlighting current challenges from a multi stakeholder perspective, while we also reflect on how bottom-up actions must be supported and enhanced through top-down policies. The final part of this piece is dedicated to some reflections about what the future might hold and how we can build, as a sector, on current innovations in digitalisation, to support more, sustainable, and inclusive approaches to education in the post Covid-19 world.*

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Digitalisation is not a new concept in international higher education. Already before the Covid-19 pandemic, the vast majority of higher education institutions had deployed some online learning platforms, created MOOCs, or experimented with blended learning or purely virtual exchanges. The developments were relatively slow, made mostly with improving accessibility and extra engagement in mind. Adapted digital learning, making full or even partial use of available technology, was confined rather to the fringes of higher education and not really part of mainstream practices.

As the pandemic struck, in just a few weeks the entire sector was upended, with students globally switching to online learning and educators generally struggling to support that – often lacking support systems and in many cases knowledge on how digitalised learning differs from face-to-face learning and on what tools are available to enable their work. Educators had a hard time, as a result, and faced considerable issues in adapting their courses. This often resulted in divisions in quality of education, as centralised coordination and quality control were often yet to be established.

This hurried shift created extreme imbalances in the quality of learning and accessibility everywhere. [According to Michael Gaebel](#), director of the EUA HE Policy Unit, countries and institutions with prior experience in digital approaches, as well as students from higher-income households performed better, while students from lower socio-economic backgrounds or from other disadvantaged groups and countries and institutions with limited infrastructure and support available, suffered more.

With those problems outlined, the awaited 'solution' for many institutions was to switch back to how education was delivered before the crisis, as soon as it became viable, with few lessons learned being implemented, assuming that the disruption in presential tuition would be short-lived. The 'return to normal' was largely expected, without anticipating how profound the changes brought by COVID were to be, in terms of how we can work and learn. Developments since tell a different story. For example, according to a [research by McKinsey](#), Covid-19 has accelerated offering digitally enhanced services by 7–10 years, depending on region. There is, therefore, a need to acknowledge that we are already in the future, whether we want it or not.

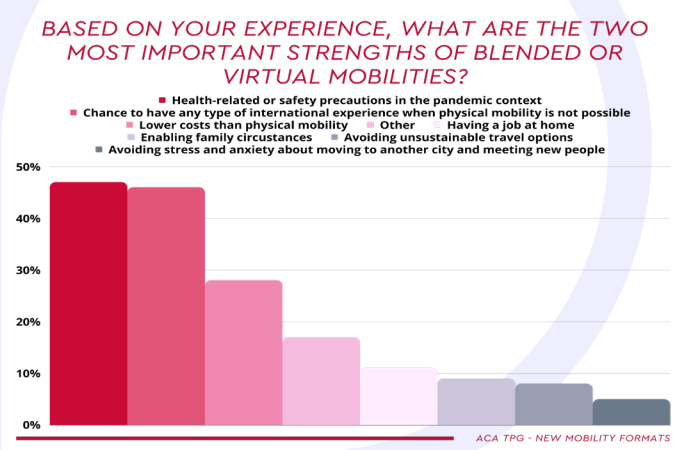
The disruption caused by Covid-19 offered us an excellent opportunity to examine how technology could be further used to expand our understanding of how we learn – and on this foundation build educational institutions that

meet the needs of modern students worldwide. In the following parts of this article, we further examine those opportunities as well as the resulting challenges.

PRESENT DAY REALITY

This 'digital experiment' of the last two years, has admittedly brought forward exceptional opportunities for the institutions, overall, and the staff and students in particular. It is important to acknowledge the possibilities of this new norm, in terms of enriching the learning experience. The use of innovative tools and learning processes has an enormous potential for teaching and learning digital skills, while providing learning opportunities in an online environment can also have mitigating effects in terms of inequality, especially for learners who may not have had otherwise access to education. Nevertheless, this potential is not automatically realised; it needs the right set of skills in digital pedagogies to ensure high quality teaching and appropriate infrastructure and support for students to ensure equitable access and high quality of learning.

This is the case also for international degree seeking students and credit mobile ones alike. In a snapshot survey conducted last year by ACA, in the framework of its [Thematic Peer Group – New Mobility Formats](#), around 1200 respondents from 24 countries across Europe identified a range of strengths for digitally enhanced mobilities. Given that the survey was conducted in early 2021, health-related precautions in the pandemic context combined with the "chance to have any type of international experience when physical mobility is not possible" emerged as the key motivations for students to engage in virtual or blended mobility, but other enabling factors were also highlighted, such as the lower costs in relation to physical mobility and the facilitation of personal circumstances.



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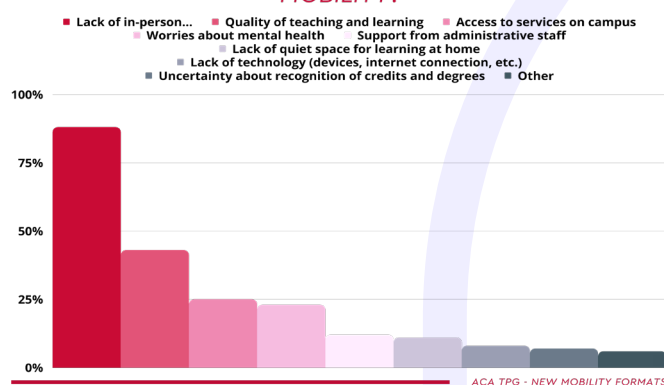
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Although digitalisation in higher education has important strengths and can provide wider access to education, there are also limitations and emerging challenges. One of the most important risks identified is based on the digital transformation within institutions, occurring without ensuring the ongoing quality of teaching and learning. These quality related concerns are well placed, especially in terms of how digitally enhanced teaching and learning will translate in comparable learning outcomes. Unfortunately, the digital divide seems to apply not only to individuals but also to institutions, with not all of them being at the same level of successfully adopting technology in their practices.

Another important aspect to consider is the computer literacy of all individuals (learners and educators) concerned. Are pedagogical staff ready to deliver high quality online teaching or do they still need concrete support in terms of training and/or technical material? At the same time, in the case of mobility, how can the management processes become leaner? We also assume nowadays that students are well equipped and competent to deal with the digitalisation of education. Nevertheless, it's not only about knowing how to use the respective equipment but also knowing how to effectively merge the educational and interaction/social aspects. Indeed, in the 2021 ACA snapshot survey, the majority of the respondents were preoccupied by the lack of in-person experience, which is particularly relevant for purely online exchanges, as well as, the quality of learning and teaching.

### IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE TWO MOST NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF BLENDED OR VIRTUAL MOBILITY?



Alleviating these aforementioned challenges should be a collaborative process. Institutions should make sure to widely share their good practices with other institutions across Europe enabling, therefore, peer learning, while the national and EU level should provide concrete support, in the form of relevant policy work and funding.

In recent years, EU policy makers have extensively worked for the shaping of Europe's digital transformation. There has been a breakthrough with digital transformation of the European Higher Education receiving strong political backup, with several high-level EU policy and programme initiatives with funding, such as the [European Education Area](#); the [Digital Education Action Plan \(2021-2027\)](#); the [Erasmus+ programme \(2021-2027\)](#); the [European Universities Initiative](#); the [European Strategy for Universities](#); the [European Student Card Initiative](#) and the [Erasmus Without Paper project](#), among others.

It is imperative for bottom-up approaches to continue to be supported and further enhanced through top-down policies, ensuring thus, the creation of a high-performing digital education ecosystem and the acceleration of the development and uptake of digital technologies. A great example of this kind of support is the development of the [European Digital Education Hub](#), and its [Community of Practice](#), currently being built by the German Academic Exchange Service for the European Commission, with the aim to facilitate the exchange of experiences and solutions across the sector.

On the other side, national governments need to recognise that technology is both essential and requires investment. Practices vary across Europe in terms of digital training of staff and provision of technical material and digital infrastructures in universities. [National funding](#), is for example, provided to universities in Germany, as of 2021, to rethink study and teaching, to develop digital teaching formats and to quickly expand their digital infrastructure and support structures. This should be the norm for all EU member states.

University associations and networks in Europe have an important role to play, as well, with facilitating this sharing of experience and good practice among institutions, channelling the discussions, and bringing the ground reality to the EU level, providing, therefore, the opportunity for much-needed feedback to policy makers that will eventually drive future advancements.

## THE FUTURE

### So, where do we go from here?

There are at least three main paths, in our view, that must be followed in upcoming years for further digitalisation of international education opportunities.

**1. We need to think about future services offered by higher education institutions.** There is an entire

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generation growing up that soon will become themselves higher education students (including international and mobile ones) that they already have some, albeit unequal, experiences in learning remotely. While not all of them will find it suitable, there is going to be a sizable segment of students who will take a liking to remote learning. Furthermore, with the rise in remote learning, there is an increase in students who are looking for more flexible options to accommodate their work and family needs. What are the services and value we are going to offer to those future students, how are we going to ensure quality and accessibility of those services? And how will we do that in collaboration with international partners, that might have different infrastructures, and might be ahead in their use of technology, or might encounter different challenges? For those segments, we are going to need not hurriedly put-together solutions but rather education services that have been built from the ground up with digitalisation and digital learning in mind.

**2. We need to think about how to make use of technology.** Funding to institutions for supporting them in implementing technological solutions is, presently,

not adequate to meet the needs of current and future students. There is an immense amount of funding currently directed towards various EdTech solutions – [in 2021, the total investment to EdTech startups was 20.8 billion USD – the majority of that in the US \(8.3 billion\) and across Europe \(3 billion\)](#). This results in an immense number of different tech solutions that in one way or another seek to both support and disrupt traditional learning paths, making it possible for institutions to choose just the tools that fit their needs. Making use of those solutions in an efficient and goal-oriented manner to increase inclusion, quality and accessibility to all kinds of learning will be crucial for future success.

**3. We need to think of digitalisation not as something that happens 'over there', but something that starts with us.** We should identify solutions we could implement in our everyday work, collect data of what works, assess progress, and then share best practices throughout our networks. It is not the responsibility of someone else to digitalise, but it is our very own responsibility – and to do it well. *Digitalisation will be a long and complicated road – but if we do it right, our future students will thank us for it.*

This article is part of the “ACA Think Pieces” series on digitalisation, launched in March 2022. The contributions in this series explore the multi-faceted nature of digitalisation in higher education institutions from an international cooperation perspective. They take under consideration current challenges at various levels, local/national/regional and European higher education policies supporting digitalisation and practical examples of digitalisation infrastructures, effective support services for virtual and/or blended mobilities and development of intercultural competences in a digital environment etc. Articles are authored by expert colleagues on the digitalisation of HE field, and are published electronically on ACA's website, towards the end of each month, from March until the end of 2022.