



**DR. DOMINIC ORR** | in  
Adjunct Professor at the University of  
Nova Gorica

Dr. Dominic Orr is adjunct professor for educational management at the [University of Nova Gorica](#), Slovenia and part of the team leadership at GIZ for the BMZ-funded digital learning platform called [atingi](#), which has over 500 thousand registered users.

He follows and shapes educational reform through his work and has published widely on social inclusion in education and on innovations such as microcredentials, open badges and open educational resources.

In 2020 he co-authored a study on the future of higher education in 2030, which was [published by Springer](#). He has worked as an external policy analyst and advisor for the EU, the OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank.

## Digitalisation in International Higher Education

Making international higher education better by putting the learner at the centre: an opportunity not to be missed.

International higher education has been subject to adaptation and differing degrees of institutional reforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most commentators argue that this has also been an opportunity to initiate reforms in higher education that were long overdue. As we find our own space in this (new) normal, we should consider what should be our North star for future strategic development.

In this Think Piece I would like to argue that mobility programmes in European higher education have recently become more flexible, and the framework conditions have become more conducive to inclusive international learning exchanges. To structure future work, I will present two layers of learner pain points we should be focussing on. In both cases, they are well within the current policy agendas in Europe, but the opportunities must be fully exploited. Furthermore, although the first layer of the pain points seems more manageable, we can only really address it if we take the second layer of the pain points seriously too. So, this Think Piece hopes to encourage innovators to fully use these opportunities; it will make international higher education better.

### THE PAIN POINTS – LAYER 1

There has been a long history of reports considering the limitations of the Erasmus+ programme, which requires a physical crossing of borders for students of different socio-demographic backgrounds, to undertake studies in a foreign country. More than a decade ago, a special analysis of the Eurostudent data set called '[Steeplechase](#)' showed that the *likelihood of not going abroad* during university studies grew with age, with dependence on self-earned income and with family obligations. Even now, ten years later, this situation remains (see also most recent [Eurostudent international comparisons](#) and additional [overview studies](#)). Additionally, in 2020 and just before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic a new criticism of the Erasmus+ and other exchange programmes for students was becoming a strong focus of the political agenda: is it right to build a programme for social and educational exchange purely centred

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on physical mobility, considering the climate change realities? A consideration of the *climate emergency* requires rethinking of the objectives behind physical displacement necessitating long travel journeys between home and foreign universities.

### The agenda

In 2020, the first concrete results of discussions on these topics were beginning to emerge in policy documents. Indeed, the criteria for universities to take part in the Erasmus+ exchange programme is stated as such in the most recent [Erasmus report](#) from December 2021:

- Concerning inclusion: *"Blended mobility can help offer additional opportunities that may be more suitable for some individuals or student groups."*
- Concerning green issues: *"(...) higher education institutions must promote environmentally friendly practices in all activities related to the Programme."*

Therefore, it appears that the first layer of the pain points has been addressed at the policy level, and in this context, we can imagine that the COVID-19 crisis was a catalyst for these developments due to the enforced limitations on physical travel.

### The practice

According to a very [recent ACA study](#) on students' *experiences of online and blended mobility*, 85% of the surveyed students from 35 countries were satisfied or very satisfied with their experience. However, the report reminds us that we are in a very early stage of maturity of this new type of offer. Some of the questions raised by the ACA study, which arose from the analysis were: *"How can the quality of learning and teaching be ensured? How can we guarantee that online learning outcomes are comparable to those achieved while studying in another country?"* As the ACA study argues, we need more data on this for a fuller analysis.

I would like to argue that there are *two action points* here:

- the *experiences and feedback from students* should be used to shape future programmes.
- finding programmes where students have been satisfied is a great way to provide *lessons learnt* that can improve other institutional efforts right from the start. There is, therefore, a need to focus as well on peer learning between implementing higher education institutions.

## THE PAIN POINTS – LAYER 2

'Pain points – layer 1' outlined pre-existing pain points and how policy agendas and recent studies have addressed them. The second layer of pain points showcases the importance of mobility programmes considering the grand challenges that higher education is facing today. Indeed, some of these challenges may be more present in international programmes rather than in domestic ones.

Students learn online whether it is formally recognised or not. This statement is focussed on the student experience, not on the definition of learning in its formal-administrative form at the present. Here there is work to do to *recognise the student learning journey* more coherently and more flexibly.

To illustrate this from the recent past, in the last decade, over 220 million people across the world have enrolled in MOOCs on platforms like Coursera, edEx and FutureLearn, with a huge share of this growth occurring during the pandemic (see [Class Central analysis](#), 2021). This means that many students currently are both enrolled formally in one university, while learning online at a different university to the one they are formally enrolled in. The increasing interest and participation in MOOCs is changing the dynamic of the higher education landscape, as it extends it beyond physical space into virtual participation. Yet this only increases the problems of recognition of learning for students, as they go beyond their main university to extend or improve their studies in other (virtual) spaces.

From a learner perspective, it would be valuable for this learning to be equally recognised, so that it becomes useful in their future learning pathways and career development. Besides this being a key question for lifelong learning, it is also a major issue for international higher education. What is happening here?

### The agenda

Two developments are worth mentioning: the European University Alliances and the work conducted around micro-credentials in Europe.

The European University Alliances (of which there are currently 44 involving 340 higher education institutions from 31 countries) came about with the recognition that twenty years of the Bologna Process so far had not yet led to sufficiently *close collaboration between universities across the continent* – to the detriment of students and teachers. The European University Alliances were set up to tackle such issues through encouraging institutions to

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work more closely together and developing joint quality assurance procedures. According to a recent [press release from the European Commission](#), the ultimate goal is to enable the development of inter-university "campus[es] around which students and researchers can move seamlessly" (European Commission tweet, 3.8.2022).

The second initiative is that on micro-credentials and it is linked to thinking about the learner's own learning pathway in a more expansive and open manner. In the White Paper '[Bologna Digital 2020](#)' we (Florian Rampelt, Alexander Knoth and I) argued that there were four areas where progress in recognition was necessary: Mobility periods abroad; learning at higher education institutions other than the one where a student is enrolled; learning through MOOCs from various providers; and learning in the workplace. The first three are clearly linked to mobility. The work on micro-credentials, which began on European Commission level in 2019 with a high-level working group, promises to alleviate these challenges.

If we want (international) higher education to become more learner centred, we need to enable more flexibility in higher education learning. Micro-credentials can recognise smaller units of learning, allowing learners to develop more individual learning pathways. The work of the European Commission (see [summary document](#)) has now been endorsed in a [Council of the European Union recommendation](#). This endorsement document includes the very important and highly useful ten European principles on micro-credentials. Principle 5 'Learning pathways' states: *"Micro-credentials are designed and issued to support flexible learning pathways, including the possibility to validate, recognise and 'stack' micro-credentials from across different systems"*.

### The practice

A clear indicator of the challenge of recognising individual learning pathways is the fact that students continue to have problems getting *learning credits*, gained in a foreign university, *recognised*, even when this learning was undertaken as part of the Erasmus+ programme. The [Eurostudent](#) study from 2020 shows that on average over two-thirds of students have had their credits fully recognised. While this is a huge improvement, over the years, perhaps we should also focus on the 17% not achieving recognition. The framework conditions are there, but some universities have not been using them consistently in the spirit of the Erasmus+ programme.

The *European University Alliances* can help to overcome this challenge – at least within the boundaries of alliance members. For instance, the Young Universities for the

Future of Europe (YUFE) alliance, states in its [vision](#) as follows: *"Imagine that you could create your own curriculum, choosing from academic courses offered at any of the YUFE universities. You could study in ten different countries, live in Spain for a while, learn Italian in Rome, do some volunteer work in the Netherlands, complete an inspiring internship in Cyprus, or find your first challenging job-shadowing position in Finland (...)"* My own experience of being involved in the first meetings within the YUFE alliance was that common understandings of curriculum, recognition and quality assurance have to first be surfaced and developed collaboratively before a vision of flexible and international learning pathways for all can be implemented.

As mentioned, the developments around *micro-credentials* will perhaps help to encourage system adaptation and evolution outside of such alliances. However, more work has to be done here. It might be noted that the European Commission working group on micro-credentials, on which I was a member, was at times hampered by representatives of higher education insisting that micro-credentials should only recognise learning, which had been achieved over a substantial period of time (e.g., around 100 hours). Such limitations to the concept of micro-credentials would not foster the kind of expansive reality of recognised learning pathways envisioned in the EU policy and micro-credentials principles.

In situations of complexity and unsure outcomes, it is better to enable experimentation, which can lead to lessons to be learnt. So, here too, the *two action points* are:

- Encourage real experiments with micro-credentials and use the experiences and feedback from students to shape future programmes.
- But also, let us look for programmes where students' individual learning pathways have been successfully recognised and consider how we might use these to make international higher education more accessible for all.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a catalyst for change, which focussed particularly on how to reach international students, who were not able to physically be on campus. We can use the momentum and the lessons learnt to *"build back better"* in international higher education, recognising that many of the policy frameworks are already in place to support this work.



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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, monthly, from March until the end of 2022.