

## Going abroad, virtually



Digitalisation opens up new opportunities for international study – even where no change of location is necessary, as it facilitates cooperation between higher education institutions. That is why it is essential to think of digitalisation and internationalisation as inextricably linked, says Dorothea Rüland of the DAAD.

Digitalisation is one of the most frequently discussed topics this year in Germany's education sector. Quite rightly, it also plays a key role in the internationalisation of higher education institutions. It removes the restrictions of time and space; partnership working can be simplified considerably, especially when it comes to intercontinental cooperation.

Internationalisation has continued at a rapid pace at German higher education institutions over recent years. Initially focused on international mobility, it now extends to all areas of a higher education institution, from teaching and research to administration – a cross-cutting theme in the truest sense. As with internationalisation, digitalisation enables new areas of activity to be tapped into at all levels of the higher education institution. This can be seen clearly in the three fields of marketing, studying and international cooperation.

### Marketing demands increasing

Nowadays, a higher education institution makes a name for itself if it pursues a consistent content strategy and lets its so-called 'storytelling' flow effectively through online and offline channels. Ultimately, the demands of prospective students are increasing in the competitive global market. They expect exciting presentations of the potential host institution on the Internet, tours of the higher education institution, insights into lectures and classes, and virtual exchanges of experiences with other visiting students and lecturers. The higher education institutions, for their part, want to recruit students that fit their profile. To achieve this, and to ensure students get off to a good start and successfully complete their degree, assistance is offered in the form of tests on the Internet and digital preparation courses that can be adapted to the needs of the individual and their own personal learning pace. Furthermore, digitalisation can simplify and professionalise the entire administrative process of application and enrolment.

This also applies for German students who want to study abroad. The Federal Republic of Germany has set itself the ambitious target of sending 50 per cent of its students abroad for part of their studies in the future. Currently, this figure is 37 per cent. At the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), we regularly carry out investigations and know that many students are still worried about losing time if they undertake a visit abroad. This could be addressed, for example, with an online database containing information on the recognition of courses attended abroad. After all, what applies to foreigners also applies to Germans the other way around: the better the preparation for their visit abroad, the more successful it will turn out to be. Digitalisation plays a key role here. And it also enables students to stay in touch with their home institution while they are abroad, and perhaps take any outstanding exams and much more.

### **Involvement of foreign lecturers**

We also know from our surveys that there will always be a certain percentage of students for whom going abroad is not an option. Digitalisation enables them to gain international experience – at least virtually – by participating in the events of other higher education institutions abroad via the Internet, through the virtual involvement of foreign lecturers in teaching units, or through the formation of project groups from various higher education institutions on the Internet. Some of the first initiatives in this field are already under way. For example, TU Dortmund University and the University of Virginia deliver joint online courses on technology assessment. The students form transnational project teams that tackle global engineering challenges. In this way, they prepare themselves for participation in international teams and cultivate their cross cultural communication skills.

Another example is the DAAD-funded trilateral Master's programme "Intellectual Encounters of the Islamicate World" at the Freie Universität Berlin, which combines online learning with attendance phases at the university. In this programme, German, Israeli, Palestinian and other international students benefit from teaching delivered by a group of highly respected professors, who could not have been brought together like this without the virtual opportunities offered by the Internet.

As far as Germany is concerned, it can be assumed that virtual degree programmes with attendance phases will become widely established, as the cross cultural added value of personal meetings is very important for many students. But new funding formats also need to be found for this. For many students, personal contact with a country and its higher education institutions remains the focal point of mobility, and so any fears that virtual mobility may replace physical mobility are somewhat unfounded. Having said that, in every day life at university physical and virtual mobility are becoming increasingly integrated and the boundaries are noticeably disappearing. In the DAAD-funded interdisciplinary Master's programme "Global Studies: Peace and Security in Africa", for which a joint degree is awarded by Leipzig University and Addis Ababa University, students from 11 countries spend three semesters in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa and one semester in Leipzig. At the beginning, students are introduced to academic work techniques in an online preparatory course by means of Skype and the learning management system Moodle. In addition to the attendance events, teaching units on basic modules are provided via teaching videos. Nowadays, every student requires cross cultural skills in the virtual world as well. Students need to be trained accordingly to communicate online in globally distributed teams: virtual mobility windows should thus become the norm in every course offered.

### **Multilateral cooperation**

Last but not least, digitalisation is also set to change the way higher education institutions cooperate. They are developing not only bilaterally, but increasingly also multilaterally. In the Northern Maritime University Network, 10 partners from countries around the North Sea – including four higher education institutions from North Germany – have joined together to form a virtual competence centre and have created online teaching modules geared to the maritime industry for students attending the partner universities in the North Sea region. The training and qualifications offered at the participating higher education institutions aim to be more specifically targeted to the needs of the maritime industry. For this they need virtual spaces and networks, both for academic studies and teaching as well as for research.

Digitalisation is changing and enriching many areas of our higher education institutions. Through the involvement of outstanding, well-respected international lecturers, it can also make an important contribution towards improving the quality of teaching.

In the future, both aspects – internationalisation and digitalisation – must be considered as inextricably linked and should be mutually related to one another in order to leverage their potential as effectively as possible.

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