

TU9 Position Paper

Digital Pact for Higher Education Teaching

[07/2020]

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TU9 demands €500 million for Digital Pact for Higher Education Teaching

The Corona pandemic forces us to fundamentally question both our world and our actions.

This is clearly the case looking back on the exceptional circumstances of the summer semester 2020, when almost all teaching in universities and colleges had to be converted to digital formats virtually overnight. While we have figures for each individual university that show the scope of those efforts, meaning the number of video conferences, telephone conferences, online meetings, consultation hours and further training courses held, what are missing are reliable, qualitative findings on the outcomes of the changes that were made. What effect has online teaching had on us lecturers and on our students? Did we achieve the same learning successes as with on-campus lectures? Or did we achieve lesser or perhaps different results? What value does presence have in the learning process, what digital formats open up new teaching opportunities, and what value does online learning and thus flexible schedules have for all involved? Studies currently being conducted will soon provide the answers we need.

And while preparations are underway for what will also be an exceptional autumn and winter semester 2020/2021, we are already being forced to look even further into the future.

In doing so, we must ask ourselves the following questions: What kind of teaching do we want and can we offer in the future? What benefits do digital formats bring? What types of face-to-face teaching have survived the Corona crisis? What quality requirements do we need to develop where digital formats are concerned? What opportunities lie in hybrid formats of knowledge transfer?

There is no going back to pre-Corona times. That is not what we want in any case. The pandemic has forced us to change far more than any university competition to drive digitalization ever would have done in the past. While reality has hit us fast and hard, it has also paved the way for improvement.

As the Presidents and Rectors of Germany's leading Technical Universities, we want to seize this situation as an opportunity to change and above all improve university teaching and learning. We need to consolidate the positive experience gained with online teaching and make improvements against the backdrop of the disadvantages perceived. We need to find the right mix of presence and digitality, in which each of the formats used reveals its strengths. The combination of presence formats with digitalized teaching - in other words blended learning - will give us significantly more scope for interaction, projects and discourse. More than ever, the university as the place in which we learn, teach, research and organize will become the central place for diverse and vibrant forms of encounter.

In order to prevent us from acting locally with every university diverting its scarce resources from other fields of development, we are calling for a national "Digital Pact for Higher Education Teaching", as formulated by the 16 State Ministers of Science. The recently negotiated economic stimulus package announced by the Federal Government covers research at non-university institutions only - it does not include equipment for online teaching at universities. That is a mistake, because the education of students and early career researchers is something we cannot do without. The package must be revised.

This Digital Pact must be shaped by application processes that are both lean and involve a minimum of red tape. Funding must flow easily and fast. Universities know best where they need to realign and invest. The Digital Pact can serve as a breakthrough, as the start of a serious drive towards digitalization in higher education. As educational and research institutions, and also as public sector entities, universities must rank among Germany's most modern organizations.

In addition to sustained investment in spatial and technical infrastructure, we must clarify the legal basis for online teaching and examinations without further delay. We want to introduce IT tools that meet the needs of teaching, learning and collaboration and also comply with data protection law. And, alongside the issue of digital infrastructure, whose expansion the Federal Government's Expert Commission for Research and Innovation (EFI) farsightedly called for more than a year ago, we must address first and foremost the quality of online teaching. This means innovative meeting places for new teaching and

learning formats, attractive further training for lecturers and students, codes of conduct for digital interaction with one another and strong university didactics to ensure learning success. It also means adapted mobility concepts, new ideas to enable easy access to courses offered by other universities and models for bringing first-year students together in large-scale degree programs, building their social networks in line with their interests and not leaving them to chance on campus.

A funding program of this kind would have far-reaching consequences for Germany as a higher education location.

We would be less location dependent. No longer would 800 or more people - independent of the Corona situation - have to crowd into a lecture hall to attend a certain lecture. They could access the digitally presented events in a place that suits their respective lives, asynchronously to the way others do. With proctored exams, we can extend these benefits to take in examinations and promote international mobility. Students could focus their on-campus presence on valuable synchronous and also hybrid formats such as project work, seminars, practice groups and internships, working on the complexities of modern disciplines in small groups with professors, assistants, tutors and fellow students.

We would be less time dependent. Students could choose when they study, when they watch an online lecture and who they watch it with. This is conducive both to individual learning and to accommodating personal lifestyles. It also allows self-led collaboration with fellow students - learning remains a social achievement and skill.

Both students and lecturers would gain new freedoms that enable them to organize their studies and teaching more flexibly.

As a result, universities would offer more convincing solutions to students' desire to shape their own lifestyles - with or without children, with or without relatives in need of care, with or without student loans (BAföG), and with or without parent-dependent financing of their studies. There would be more real opportunities for our students to get a taste of other subjects, seminars and lectures, including events at other universities offering similar subjects, both nationally and internationally. Competition drives student numbers. And if, in our capacity as Germany's leading Technical Universities, we were to make high-quality digital content publicly accessible, not only students but also professional practice would benefit from our research findings, to the advantage of all.

There are, however, also objections to all these advantages. There is a strong alliance of proponents of the traditional, comprehensive face-to-face teaching that has been successfully offered for centuries, not least because of the lack of technological alternatives and for significantly lower student numbers. The aim is not to replace one with the other, but to complement and enhance classroom teaching - to develop and use online teaching - where it has proven itself. University life will be different from what it was in pre-Corona times: We are now calling for state funding for the expansion of universities as forward-looking educational institutions with modern digital infrastructure, adapted spatial models to accommodate new teaching formats, an evolving university didactic approach that reflects the diversity of options available and an innovative enrollment system that enables students to study in different locations.

We must act now: the universities, the policymakers and funders. A first proposal put forward by the federal states for a "Digital Pact for Higher Education Teaching" called for the Federal Government to allocate €500 million in funding. We support that call!