

# UNICA Student Conference 2021

## Topics for the 10 discussion Fora

Description and examples of reference documents/suggested reading

### Introduction

Change is naturally inherent to Higher Education and, in the past nine editions of the UNICA Student Conference, students discussed a range of topics that have deeply affected universities, while trying to come up with practices and solutions to improve their (and their successors) educational experience.

As an event from the networks of universities from the capitals of Europe, discussions have been increasingly focused on the relation between the institutions and the cities they are a part of. The cities were, in the context of those nine editions, regarded as the epicentre of opportunity, innovation, contact, and culture – a feature that made them generally appealing, and one of the biggest advantages for universities.

And then 2020 happened: COVID-19 disrupted the urban ecosystem as cities became the epicentre of the pandemic, and universities were called out to accelerate the digitalisation process. With inequalities becoming more evident and the capacity of local governments and services being questioned, is the prominence of cities declining? How are universities adapting and how is “the new normal” transforming the role of the academic communities? How can you, the students, take part in the educational revolution, tackle the urban metamorphosis, and confront societal reform?

These and many more issues will be addressed during the 10<sup>th</sup> UNICA Student Conference and the previous online activities on the different specific topics.

[Policy Brief: COVID-19 in an urban world](#)

### 1. Science & the City

Cities play a central role in innovation dynamics. Geographical proximity of stakeholders and multidisciplinary interactions are key features to define them as innovation hubs. However, COVID-19 transformed the urban ecosystem in a short window of time, both by vacating cities from tourists and by pushing the workforce to smart working. Despite the abnormal situation created by the pandemics, this should be an occasion for cities to reshape and rethink their priorities (for example, the transition towards climate neutrality by 2030 or the adhesion to movements of inclusion such as “Europe Must Act”). The citizens should be included in this innovation process. Although the role of universities and experts is primordial in this transition, citizen science is a source of involvement, an opportunity to bring

communities together and helps strengthen the policies based on scientific evidence. Citizens' engagement has been made more visible during the COVID-19. In fact, to tackle the virus, many urban initiatives showed up, for example the Urban Innovative Actions (urban areas with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges). Still, many questions remain on how to further develop the relationship between citizens and Higher Education: how these two key elements in the urban ecosystem collaborate to tackle the society's issues and build the city of tomorrow?

- [Europe's Recovery Plans: A Unique Opportunity for Urban Regeneration](#)
- UNICA webinar [The Role of Universities in Fostering High Quality Citizen Science](#)
- UNICA [Seminar on Research Policies & Urban Challenges](#)
- [Using the power of citizen science to boost COVID-19 research](#)
- [Europe Must Act](#)

## 2. Equal, diverse and inclusive universities

While exacerbating global inequalities in general, COVID-19 exposed and widened the educational gap among students. The pandemic pushed the digital revolution, transporting educational activities from the real to the online world. However, the students' ability to adapt and respond could not accompany the trend as many communities lack the access to the technological resources. A few examples: students with learning difficulties and disabilities may have been overwhelmed by the digital solutions, students with disadvantaged backgrounds seem to face more difficulties to reach a good internet connection or to use a computer, many refugees' camps have seen their educational activities suspended. Higher education institutions have an essential role in promoting equal opportunities and integration plans, but especially during this period, more efforts should be done to assure education to everybody. More than ever, universities might foster strategies that support social engagement among students, educate students for social impact, and give support to those students who cannot adopt a proper digitalised learning. In recent years, several universities have developed projects to assist refugees on campus or create better conditions for inclusive mobility of people with disabilities. During the post COVID-19 era, more efforts should be done in this sense.

- [University Students Supporting Refugees](#)
- [European higher education in the Covid-19 crisis, September 2020](#)
- [Universities responding to forced displacement- Report](#)
- [Corona vs. Inequality](#)

## 3. Europe's position in world politics

In the 2020 State of the Union Speech, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, stated: *"We now have the opportunity to achieve something historic for the European Union"*. In recent years the role of the EU has been debated. In fact, if some claim that the lack of hard power makes the EU a weak actor in international politics, others defend that the force of the EU must be found in its soft power and

its values which are an example to the world. But are these values still enough to assure a prominent presence of the EU in world politics? 2020 put even more pressure on the EU, as the spread of the COVID-19 and Brexit increased the national sentiments within the EU, sentiments which are finding fertile terrain for national movements everywhere in the world. But can 2020's crisis be an opportunity to achieve something historic for the EU, as the President of the European Commission said? During the spread of the coronavirus, it became clear that a European approach has been necessary: the NextGenerationEU plan is built on the historical value of solidarity. Can Europe become the main actor by working to increase the collaboration between states instead of competition? What did we learn about the European Union in the face of this unprecedented crisis? Will it transform the approach to old concerns related to the integration process and European identity?

- [Ionuț-Mircea MARCU, How can a common European historical memory enhance EU's soft power after the COVID-19 crisis?](#)
- [Enhancing Europe's Global Power: A Scenario Exercise with Eight Proposals, Christoph M. Abels and Helmut K. Anheier Hertie School; Iain Begg and Kevin Featherstone London School of Economics and Political Science](#)

#### **4. Social media and European societies**

In the Lockdown Era, everybody enjoyed the virtual opportunities which gave the sensation to conserve a sort of contact with the reality. And it is true that the benefits of online platforms have been even more underlined: they facilitated cross-border trading within and outside the EU and opened new opportunities to a variety of European businesses and traders. At the same time, this lawless virtual land is leading to concerns, complaints and dilemmas, especially concerning the monopolisation of a few larger platforms in the digital economy, the violation of the privacy, the facility to spread illegal material and fake news, the lack of support for smaller platforms, start-ups and so on. The EU very recently responded to these issues, by publishing the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act. While the EU is trying to find solutions to guarantee a safe virtual space for its citizens, debates arise on the role of other stakeholders in society, such as the media, companies, cultural institutions and, naturally, universities. What should be the role of universities in digital education? How can HEIs promote adequate practices that allow communities (inside and outside the academic world) to have critical thinking and distinguish fake news from facts, to compete with the big bosses of the virtual space, and to promote alternative solutions to stay updated while respecting the values of the European societies?

- [The European Digital Services Act package](#)
- [Universities develop approach to fighting fake news](#)
- [Facebook walks as Google caves in Australia](#)

## 5. More sustainable societies: the role of universities

As COVID-19 revealed structural inequality, inadequate health systems, gaps in social protection, widespread poverty, environmental degradation, the climate crisis, among many other challenges, it became more evident that there is much to be done until 2030 to achieve the SDGs set out by the UN. Moreover, with the spread of COVID-19 and its consequent lockdown, many animals and plants reappeared in zones which were polluted. We also witnessed temporary improvements in air quality, lower greenhouse gas emissions and lower levels of noise pollution. At the same time, many other aspects have been neglected: the single use of plastic is now the norm, the most vulnerable groups keep being neglected. In rebuilding the society after COVID-19, we must adopt a sustainable approach and contribute to the realisation of the UN Agenda 2030. How can universities and students contribute? First, by educating students to mainstream sustainable practices in their lifestyles. Second, by adopting a holistic approach to sustainability, which may be facilitated through interdisciplinary and intersectoral education. Third, conduct research and collaborate among universities to new and alternative solutions to promote and integrate the SDGs in every aspect of the academic reality (courses, research, every day operations). Fourth, use the notoriety and prestige that is natural to many universities to lobby governments and EU bodies for sustainable interests. It is also relevant to make use of existing tools to meet such interests, such as mobility, by turning students into ambassadors of SDGs, just as it's happening for the European Identity. Young people, belonging to the Millennial and Z generations, already have a sustainable mindset, being aware of the carbon footprint left by the previous generations. The birth of movements like "Fridays for Future", shows how important it is now for the new generation to adopt climate friendly laws, principles and lifestyles. This could be an example for other movements and could enchain reflections on other SDGs.

- [Higher education's key role in sustainable development, 2018, Patrick Blessinger, Enakshi Sengupta and Mandla Makhanya](#)
- [Higher Education Sustainability Initiative \(HESI\)](#)
- [Transforming Consumer Behavior: Introducing Self-Inquiry-Based and Self-Experience-Based Learning for Building Personal Competencies for Sustainable Consumption](#)
- [Tackling Inequality: A New Social Contract for a New Era](#)

## 6. International students: Engaging with local communities

According to the Erasmus Impact Study, the programme not only improves career prospects, as it also offers students broader horizons and social links. How many times have you heard about Erasmus students hanging out only with other Erasmus students during their international experience? However, many tend to create links with other international students while neglecting the discovery and assimilation of the local culture. Upon arrival to the host country, an international student faces many challenges: language barriers, stereotyping, and cultural differences. Though equipped with International Offices, universities do not always get involved in the social practices of exchange students. How can universities help international students to integrate? What are the opportunities for international

students besides language courses? What could be done more? Is it beneficial, during the experience abroad, to look for a part-time job, or join voluntary activities? What are the opportunities for this group in local politics and student and other youth associations? Getting involved in the local community through one of these actions could prove to be a great way to create beautiful and long-lasting friendships with local students while impacting positively the host city.

- [The Erasmus Impact Study](#)
- [What are the top three recommended activities, outside of study, for newly arrived international students to engage in?](#)

## **7. How can Universities and cities work together to improve students' life?**

The unexpected COVID-19 exposed the many differences that exist among students and how a difficult background can limit life and career opportunities. These issues are now on the table and universities can take this opportunity to reinvent themselves and provide equal opportunities for every student. In order to do this, universities need to work closely with other actors that operate in the system they are part of: the city. Cities that aim to attract a student population have different challenges to deal with. Ensuring support and benefits like reduced fares for students on urban public transport, or good quality in student services are among the easiest to accomplish. Developing a strategy for affordable housing beyond campuses requires a more decisive approach which most cities have not really undertaken yet. Apart from the students' basic needs, another element that has recently been brought to spotlight is mental health. A growing number of universities aims to design and implement practices inspired by the principles of compassion and care. Cooperation between universities and other urban public bodies might be the one driving the transition to what has been called the 'compassionate city'.

- [The Student City. Strategic Planning for Student Communities in EU Cities](#)
- [Compassionate Cities](#)
- [Compassionate City Toolbox](#)

## **8. Formal and informal learning: Innovative pedagogical approaches prompted by the COVID-19 crisis**

In the common imaginary, the coronavirus only anticipated the digitalisation of education. In a society where acronyms as FOMO (Fear of missing out) and FOBA (Fear of being alone) are commonplace, digitalisation needed to become a priority far before the coronavirus. The real question is: given the fact that our youngest generations can have access to all the information they want to, which role lies in the figure of an educator or a professor? The current pandemic and the adoption of smart-working, digital lessons and computerized interactions, nowadays the need to become tech savvy is an essential skill and education needs to change in this direction. With the digitalisation, the search for “microcredentials” is now the norm, thanks to that, learners can be awarded upon the competition of a short assessed learning experience. In the meantime, the demand for “human” skills will increase. How can a community that

lives from the interaction of different generations process these changes while remaining faithful to its primordial mission? Does Higher Education need a revolution in structure and organisation of the learning methods? What is the place of interpersonal skills in the post-COVID era?

- [How higher education can adapt to the future of work](#)
- [The COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on teacher education](#)
- [Thinking about Pedagogy in an Unfolding Pandemic](#)
- [A European approach to microcredentials](#)

## **9. Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary education**

Globalisation may arguably have been one of the reasons why COVID-19 travelled fast and rapidly plunged the world into a pandemic. However, one must also consider that maybe it was also due to this phenomenon that science responded fast, and we now have a vaccine to fight COVID-19. However, while hopefully the immune system will be safeguarded soon, the scale of the virus infection is much larger: it impacted the economy, culture, and the society – for these we don't have a vaccine. The solution for these areas may rely on the same as it did for science: collaboration. Had the pandemic happened in the 80s or 90s, and the circumstances would have been much different and so, having no doubt that the world is now connected, how can disciplines collaborate in order to create better solutions for sustainability problems? Cooperation between different disciplines has been stimulated for a few years now, with institutions motivating researchers to collaborate on projects and programmes. This collaborative spirit is actually leading to innovative learning approaches and interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary education is now part of the educational vocabulary. But what do they mean in practical terms? How can an already rich STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) curricula integrate an interdisciplinary approach? And how can students understand the benefits of news practices and take part in this transformation?

- [Inter- and transdisciplinary approaches](#)
- [Open letter with recommendations on effective funding for inter- and transdisciplinary research](#)
- [UNICA Rectors Seminar “Interdisciplinary & intersectoral education and research in modern universities”](#)

## **10. Jobs in the digital society : The role of universities**

Technology had already been part of our lives, coronavirus only made it clearer. Almost everything moved online, and digitalisation is now one of the priorities of the public and private sectors everywhere in the world. In this digitalised era, where digital skills are more needed than ever, what is the role of the universities? It seems easy to understand how education is essential to build digital capabilities in order to give the students the tools to find their way in a digitalised society. However, not always universities have the human resources or technical capacity to respond to this need – how to overcome this constraint? Universities play an important role in assisting students looking for a traineeship and to

develop career plans, providing legal and financial advice and connecting them to enterprises. In the last decade, universities have also been active in developing soft skills. However, in an increasingly virtual society, how can universities help us develop our interpersonal skills? The latter will become probably more and more important to find a job.

- [Negotiating in a Digitalised Era](#)
- [How will universities prepare students for Industry 4.0?](#)