UNICA

Network of Universities
from the Capitals of Europe

UNICA STUDENT DECLARATION '21

Transforming the University in the post COVID-19 age

Views and reccommendations on European Higher
Education pressing issues from participants in the
UNICA Student Conference 2021

UNICA – Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe

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A free electronic version of this report is available at http://www.unica-network.eu

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About UNICA, the Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe

UNICA is an institutional Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe founded in 1990, currently bringing together 54 member universities from 38 European capitals.

The Network seeks to be a driving force in the development of the European Higher Education and Research Area and to promote academic excellence, integration and cooperation between member universities throughout Europe.

To achieve its aims, UNICA articulates the views of Member Universities to European institutions, to national, regional, and municipal governments, and internationally. It provides the Members with information on European initiatives and programmes, and supports them in developing cooperative projects.

It offers a forum in which Member Universities can reflect on the latest developments and demands of strategic change in university research, education and administration. In this context, the Network organises member-driven activities, including conferences, seminars, capacity building and skills development workshops and projects.

UNICA has currently seven Working Groups, working namely on International Relations within universities, education, research, sustainability, scholarly communication, communication and public relations and collaboration between universities and cities. Each Working Group meets regularly to discuss the current and strategic areas of work.

The sense of community is a driving principle for UNICA: in this regard, the Network values the voice of every part of it, including students.

About the UNICA Student Conference

Initiated for the first time on the initiative of Freie Universitat Berlin, the UNICA Student Conference is an integral part of the UNICA Network that brings together the students of UNICA universities.

It is organised every 2-3 years since 2000 (ten editions of the Conference were organized between 2000 and 2021) and lets students examine, debate and share their views on Europe's most pertinent issues. It also encourages them to formulate their opinions and recommendations that could lead to new interesting initiatives. For instance, the Working Group UNICA Green (now UNICA Green & SDGs), was created following the input from the participants in the UNICA Student Conference 2010 in Rome.

The event is normally hosted by a member university and, traditionally, UNICA partners with student organisations such as the Erasmus Student Network and the European Students' Union.

The UNICA Student Conference acts as a bridge between students and the Higher Education Institutions' leaderships as well as European policy makers. The main outcome of the Conference is a valuable document which is shared within all the UNICA community and beyond.

For all these reasons, the UNICA Network strongly encourages all its member Universities to participate in this initiative, to make the voice of the UNICA Students heard!

The next edition will take place in Rome Ventotene, in Summer 2023 and you can already express your interest. More information about it is available at the end of this document.

About NOVA University Lisbon

Located in Lisbon, NOVA is a young, comprehensive, European university. It develops activities across a broad range of areas from engineering and technology to humanities, medicine, health and life sciences, economics and management, social sciences, law, and information and data science.

NOVA is a global and civic University. Global since its teaching and research follow an international agenda with a quality well recognized by its partners overseas; and civic, because it is committed to the development of society, culture and economy of the Lisbon metropolitan area, of the country, of Europe and also of the Portuguese-speaking countries, reinforcing centuries of common history.

It develops top-notch research contributing to tackle major societal challenges, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the European Green Deal. This is expressed by the international funding of its research and cooperation development.

Word from Luciano Saso, President of UNICA in

At the core of everything we do at UNICA is the idea of bringing together all members of the academic community to share, learn and add value on the needs of strategic change in Higher Education. This includes the students, who represent the future generations, and therefore are at the centre of our action.

The main output of this year's edition has been this insightful UNICA Student Declaration. This document of incredible importance shows the priorities of the new generation, one that is highly concerned with sustainability, inclusion, and European cooperation. This body of work is of special value having in mind the context in which it was prepared: the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a group of students whose academic path was deeply impacted by the pandemic but that still stands motivated to think and design the university of the future for the ones that will follow.

It is the role of current leaders (inside and outside the university) to listen to this voice and respond accordingly by creating the conditions for a university, a city, a world, and a future that responds to the needs of those who will be the leaders of tomorrow.

As President of the UNICA network, I would like to congratulate all students for their commitment and outstanding work in the last months. To all those who come across these recommendations, I sincerely hope the effort made by the UNICA students will be taken into account and be used as a reference for new initiatives. Good reading!

Word from João Amaro de Matos, Vice-Rector of NOVA in

Once again, UNICA focused on the students´ role and contribution to the responsible development of the Higher Education panorama in a challenging Europe. NOVA is proud of supporting this view and sharing with all its partners the result of the Lisbon´s UNICA Student Conference.

Introduction

The UNICA Student Conference 2021 marked the 10th edition of this initiative. It was an opportunity to reflect on the ever-changing landscape of European Higher Education, look back on the legacy left by students in previous editions, and examine the evolution of the relationship between universities and capital cities. However, there was an additional layer to be considered in this edition – one that came unexpected with a deep transformative impact: the COVID-19 pandemic.

As an event from the network of universities located in the capitals of Europe, in the past nine editions discussions have been 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. With COVID-19 disrupting the urban ecosystem as cities became the epicentre of the pandemic, universities were called out to take action, by accelerating the digitalization process and taking part in the search for solutions and answers.

Like most academic activities the UNICA Student Conference, initially planned to take place at the campus of NOVA University Lisbon in Portugal, had to switch to an online format. Despite the challenges of physical distance, UNICA and NOVA University Lisbon together with partner organization Erasmus Student Network, European Students' Union, and International Young Nature Friends, promoted a new structure with warm-up meetings to debate the topics between April and June, an experts webinar with Professor Sue Black from Lancaster University and Professor Peretz Lavie from Technion - Israel Institute of Technology in early July, and finally a three day conference in mid-July when participants prepared a set of recommendations to be voiced within the UNICA Network as well as to relevant stakeholders and, hopefully, that will give rise to new challenging initiatives.

The *UNICA Student Declaration: Transforming the University in the post COVID-19 age* contained herein provides a written account of the key challenges, priorities and recommendations for Higher Education today, as seen through the eyes of the students from universities in capital cities across Europe.

Though students were provided guidance by academic tutors in their universities and feedback from the coordinators of the UNICA Working Groups, the authorship of the declaration both in terms of content and structure belongs to the Chairs and Student Delegates of the UNICA Student Conference 2021.

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UNICA STUDENT DECLARATION 2021

TRANSFORMING THE UNIVERSITY IN THE POST-COVID 19 AGE

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Topic 1

Science and the city

in **Inês Cisneiros, NOVA University Lisbon**

In collaboration with:

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The presence of Universities in their cities impacts not just local **economic dynamics**, but also their **demographical renewal** and **communal relationships**. As privileged pit stops in the route of knowledge and innovation fluxes, Universities should adopt a more active role in serving their cities, making their student body and local community intertwine and learn from each other, becoming more **resilient,** developing **fitting** ways of meeting challenges of different natures, **keeping up** with general world development and progress and re-organizing whenever required. The COVID-19 pandemic showed how the **interconnectedness between people and territory** can be weakened by mainstreaming the dematerialization of interpersonal relationships in general, but it also highlighted the ways in which said relationship remains **essential** and can be improved.

Aiming at this purpose, the students of UNICA Student Conference acknowledge and highlight that:

- Central and local governments should maintain close contact with Universities as *stakeholding partners* in the development of *learning cities,* requiring mutual input and asking help to ensure quality in their cultural, educational and social service.
- **Citizens of all ages and backgrounds** should be invited to comment and work on the design and development of RTD initiatives, in order for these to be better tailored in meeting real challenges and needs.
- **Citizens' science** should be fostered as a way to include, besides local students, non-academic citizens in general in the science-making process, getting them **familiar with scientific jargon and methods** and **empowering citizens with tools to critically gather and analyze information**.
- Teaching the **language of science** should start early on and Universities should develop partnerships with local schools to arrange sessions where academic research projects can be presented on simple terms to children and they would be asked to engage in simple, but

related, problem solving exercises. The same could be adapted and directed towards elderly homes, for example.

- Research projects should turn outwards and look for **opportunities to involve local populations in academic work**, leveraging on citizens' proximity with objects of study (knowledge on local realities, symbiotic social and ecological relationships, etc.), contributing for the creation of jobs or free-time occupation and providing opportunities for dialogue and mutually-beneficial learning.

- Advertising is important to make citizens and students aware of initiatives: promoting scientific achievements (also to the non-academic community) should be taken as part of the process and included in the subjects' programme and curricula.

- Universities should offer **varied life-long learning options** that citizens can accommodate at different stages of their lives.

- Universities should be included in the drafting of local policies in general, to ensure local government decisions are taken in accordance with the latest updated and science-validated knowledge.

- Providing **training in digital skills**. Universities with technological courses are especially well-positioned to help citizens improve and update digital skills that are more and more required not just as a substitute for in-person socialization, but also for citizens to relate with central administration and general state services.

- Minimum mandatory physical presence in hybrid learning systems should be required, but can be adapted in accordance with the specific courses' requirements.
    - Professors should be more proactive to check on students and provide frequent feed-back.

- Alternative opportunities to connect with peers need to be fostered.

- **Hackathons** as events where students and/or citizens are gathered and pitched problems they have to solve as a collective should be mainstreamed in digital formats and organised by Universities in cooperation with local/municipal governments/administration.

- **Digital applications** that provide answers to medical and scientific questions where citizens can insert their doubts and students feed it with the respective information can be designed and developed.

- **Computer lending programs** and **digital training** should be offered at the University and at the city-level. Universities may contribute with human resources, for example by **pairing students with citizens to provide technical assistance or digital training**.

- Hybrid learning models should contribute to include and not result in financial discrimination. Students willing to learn in-person must also be given that chance, and even supported whenever they cannot afford it.

- Universities should offer **affordable housing for students** and scholars, as well as **family-friendly services** on campus or by partnering with local government, as it attracts prestigious lecturers and scientists to on-site teaching.

- Auditoriums, libraries and sport facilities may be shared between the city and the university as spaces for both students and regular citizens (either children in school years or working or retired adults) to foster **community-building** and should be seen as places for **public deliberation**.

- Book presentations, doctoral defenses and local associations meetings should be held in public spaces to trigger **dialogue between citizens and academics**.

- Libraries providing equipment, wi-fi and places for **late-hours study** need to serve the students' body but also local communities: access to **open access** resources and **open research data** would enable unhindered access to research results to all interested parties.

Topic 2

Equal, diverse and inclusive universities

in **Juan Rayón González, Erasmus Student Network**

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Higher education plays a crucial role in achieving better societies. In order to do that, it cannot afford to leave anyone behind. Universities should have as a central priority not only to continuously improve the diversity of their student population, but also respond to the challenges that these students face. Otherwise, Universities will not manage to bridge the existing gaps that currently exist in our societies.

We, the student delegates of UNICA, believe that special focus should be put in helping students with disabilities access education, and fully enjoy the student experience like their non-disabled peers. Socialisation and peer to peer support are crucial here. We also believe that in the times of digitalisation, the digital divide remains a key challenge which requires direct support for universities. Equally, as Universities of the capitals of Europe, UNICA members should work with governments to improve support to refugee and migrant students.

Universities will never be fully inclusive if an important part of the student population is struggling. The pandemic has brought with it an epidemic of mental health issues among students, who have in many cases bear the brunt of lockdown measures and restrictions. These problems disproportionately affect students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Besides measures to help disadvantaged students, we also need Higher Education to become the best possible creator of active, engaged and aware citizens. Topics like the sustainable development goals, human rights and equality should be a key element of curricula.

To achieve all these goals, we propose the following recommendations, directed to Universities, Governments and local and regional authorities:

- Make inclusion a central priority of the University strategic plan, involving professors and staff. Focus on training to teach diverse classrooms.

- Establish comprehensive units which can support the students with disabilities and mental health problems in their daily lives.

- Constitute a student representative board where students from different backgrounds are directly present and able to advocate for their needs.

- Consult the student representative board in decision making and planning to ensure a diverse approach.

- Empower the figure of academic advisors that can provide targeted support to the students, depending on their particular needs and characteristics.

- Prioritise access to IT tools and proper internet connection to every student, making sure that online content is fully accessible.

- Increase collaboration between Universities and local authorities to improve access to the labour market of students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- Including a global perspective in the curriculum of all kinds of studies, making sure that students are aware of societal challenges, and equipped to contribute towards solutions.

- Conduct an in-depth research on existing mental problems that are most common between students to understand how to tackle specific mental issues.

- Establish strong communication links and implement inclusion offices/officers across all levels of education to make transitions between education levels smoother and support consistent to the students' needs.

- Create a 24/7 helpline consisting of psychologists in collaboration with universities and the governments to provide urgent support for students with mental health problems or other issues.

- Establish programmes for University-wide inclusion, awareness, and social integration such as mentor and buddy programmes.

- Support socialization programmes and students' clubs, and focus on collaborative projects in which students from different backgrounds and study fields can participate.

- Support refugees by enhancing language learning, improve living conditions, and provide access to equipment and IT tools.

- Redistribute funds to allocate finances into funding of psychological support services that would minimise the financial burden of students who are not capable of spending their money on psychological help.

Topic 3

Europe's position in world politics

in **Ewan Ramsay, University College Dublin**

In collaboration with:

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Other major powers that contemporary Europe competes with, namely the USA and China, exert large amounts of global influence through their utilisation of 'hard power'. This is done largely through military intervention or the imposition of economic sanctions. Europe lacks a coherent military force and despite the size of the trading bloc, the euro currency's small market share in comparison to the US dollar means economic sanctions imposed by the bloc are comparatively less effective than those implemented by China or the US. All of this amounts to a decline in Europe's global influence in the 21st century, however, this does not have to be the case. Through its institutions and universities Europe can look to exert major influence in the form of soft power by becoming a hub of academic freedom and innovation, and disseminating its norms and values to the rest of the world.

By increasing the sense of shared solidarity between European States, there can be a reduction in the inertia that is seen in European level decision making, where member states are seen at odds with each other. With this Europe can be a united front and be a global leader in aspects such as independent academia and research. Independent research is essential for the growth and development of both societies and Universities, and this must be protected. The proliferation of soft power, especially in universities in both Europe and around the world, can act as a medium for which European policies can spread throughout the world, increasing Europe's role on the global stage.

This UNICA declaration recommends that the European states and Universities should collaborate in the following ways:

- Devoting **funding and research** into the creation of a **common European history** to augment the sense of solidarity between European Countries
  - o This should include **both** specific aspects of the current 27 EU member states as well as encompassing all states in Europe

- Set up societies and centres within Universities through which to **promote** this shared sense of identity and History.
    - This can be achieved through both **academic**, such as modules for students, as well as **extracurricular**, such as cultural nights
- Setting up an independent European body to act as an **academic watchdog** for abuses in line with the Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research
- Have a minimum threshold for **standards of academic freedom**, such as free from censorship or major influence from large donors. Failure should to comply with such standards **should be met with sanctions**, such as limited participation in academic initiatives
    - These standards should be based off both **Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research** as well was the European Students' Union 2008 **Students' Right Charter**
- Setting up grants and scholarships to enable students who face academic censorship to pursue their **research independently**

Topic 4

Social media and European societies

Vasco Ricoca Peixoto, NOVA University Lisbon

In collaboration with:

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Social Media is a powerful tool for global information and public influence, but it comes with risks for individuals and society. These risks include massive misinformation (Fake News, polarization and information/advertising bubbles, propaganda, undisclosed algorithms with uncertain social effects and targeted advertising misinformation), which has proven to be capable of causing social harm, put public and individual health at risk and promote unjustified hate, discrimination and distrust in institutions. On the other hand, evidence is growing about relevant mental health and wellbeing impact (self-esteem, addiction, anxiety, social media peer pressure, cyber bullying), and yet to be understood broader societal impacts.

In this regard, we propose the following recommendations for Universities and Society

- **Education** - efforts should be put towards development of campaigns, tools and courses with focus on social media literacy, media awareness, awareness of information bubbles, critical thinking and critical appraisal of content and social-emotional skills. This should be promoted in all educational settings (with easily available online tools). As a part of a broader societal effort, universities should lead the development of these tools, promoting and advocating for their application and evaluating their impact.
- **Research** - Prioritizing multidisciplinary and cross-faculty research groups on Social Media and the creation of social media departments in Universities with adequate, transparent and ethical funding. Research areas should include education, misinformation flows and bubbles, impact on social issues and mental health, functioning of algorithms and definition and impact of regulations.

- **Advocacy** - Universities should be close to governments and regulators to support and inform the development of social media policy. Communication departments of Universities should consider social media as a critical area of public communication and should work with social media stakeholders (influencers etc.) to connect Universities with the broader public opinion.

- **Regulation and platform strategies** must advance to promote the defence of users rights with support from universities research and insights.

  o More power over advertising and content preference settings defined by users (ex-targeted advertising, content prioritization algorithm decisions). Abuses should be reported.

  o Algorithms should be more transparent and anonymized data should be shared with Universities for clear and ethical research purposes(e.g. studying high risk information bubbles and misinformation, understanding information and sentiment flows in a global world).

  o Paid advertising should be traceable and strategies should be in place to avoid large misinformation advertising campaigns in social media targeting specific groups

  o Efforts to Prevent entrance in bubbles and to buffer or avoid misinformation with changes in algorithms should be promoted (e.g. exposure to information from credible sources/opposing arguments).

  o A symbol approach to categorize advertising and "risk content" should be considered for users empowerment

  o Educational ads and campaigns/courses on social media as a social responsibility effort of the platform's owners must be promoted

  o The platforms should share responsibility over contents as an incentive to improve content quality according to their own policies and international regulations/recommendations.

All regulatory and platform strategies must be cautious to protect individual freedom online and access to quality content without compromising freedom of speech and opinion in its various components and Universities should monitor and evaluate evolving strategies. Action in needed and balanced approach is necessary to protect and improve democracies in the years to come.

Topic 5

More sustainable societies: the role of universities

in Paria Bagheri, International Young Nature Friends

In collaboration with:

Laura Ghitoi (University of Amsterdam), Marie Gräf (Freie Universität Berlin), Taison Lee (King's College London)

Since the Stockholm declaration of 1972, there have been several declarations on sustainability in higher education (SHE). In 2001, Kofi Annan argued that the biggest challenge in this century is to transform sustainable development from abstract to real for all the people on the planet (United Nations, 2001). Thus, there is a strong correlation between the influence of HEIs (higher education institutions) and their accountability to sustainable development. Nevertheless, universities have long denied or failed to address their responsibilities to reach SHE. HEIs can become main implementor advocators for sustainable action within our societies. Their potential varies from **curricula to extracurricular activities**, to **multidisciplinary discussions** to **multi sectoral collaborations**, child universities to senior university concepts, third sector NGOs to academia, and via research to corporations and industry.

To solve these challenges, UNICA recommends that HEIs and governmental sectors cooperate to:

- Use larger **budgets** towards education which are specifically addressed to benefit sustainability. For example: budgets for fossil free energy sources, budget for waste reduction and management, etc. Use already existing budgets into incubator and cashback youth initiatives.
- **Give universities a manageable timeframe** to switch to a sustainable-oriented curriculum or transition to fossil-free energy in order to have more access to academic fundings - therefore, connect money to sustainability as an incentive.
- Increase the level of **preparation and continuously update training of teachers and lectors, deans and presidents** in order to more effectively achieve sustainability of the educational environment.

- Create, offer and promote a guideline with **applied examples of best practices at the institutional level** to inspire other organisations and individuals.

- Implement **sustainable thinking, new methods of teaching** and a **diverse curriculum** to educate students in **future skills**, particularly **mind innovation and leadership skills** as key elements toward sustainable development.

- Develop **educational social hubs** within the university. Make the university a place of life experiences, not only an academic context.

- Reach a **multidisciplinary approach with the interaction of different study fields** via creating and promoting **study courses that focus on interdisciplinary sustainability** in HEIs for a new generation of experts.

- Give PhD students, professors, researchers and lecturers the **opportunity to research outside their field of study through a more secure position such as tenure, better structure of sabbatical leave, and fewer working hours for a better work-life balance.**

- **Establish updated SHE leadership structures**, such as a sustainability office, with special positions being exclusively concerned with sustainability, sustainable development and long-term thinking, rather than day to day operational and educational management.

- **Galvanize action between multiple stakeholders**, who can collaborate, exchange best practices and show unity and solidarity in the face of urgent global problems.

- Install **connections to different global realities** via networking and collaboration, to hear voices from all around the world in study materials aimed at sustainability and global problems connected to climate change.

- Strengthen and promote **interdisciplinary work** across different universities by offering joined courses or projects which are focused on sustainability, whereas students are given extra-credit points for their studies.

- Assignment of a specific **sustainability responsible czar**, with direct access to the head of university to report on different faculties.

- Rise to the urgent challenge of the climate crisis and contribute to impactful solutions within different sectors and stakeholders of society **via curricular and extracurricular activities**.

- **Accreditation of extracurricular activity** on study plan and ETCS.

- Long-term planning on integrating **long life experiential learning** methodologies into curricula.

Topic 6

International students: engaging with local communities

in **Tajana Mohnacki, Erasmus Student Network**

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Studying abroad is a dream come true for many students, however, it entails some specific challenges. International and exchange students often face **socio-cultural, administrative and language barriers**, they struggle to **access the necessary information** when it comes to their host community as well as discover **activities** where they can **engage** with the members of the **community**. International and exchange students form and stay in groups, missing an opportunity for intercultural exchange and to further develop their **intercultural competence**; furthermore, this is then translated in the academic setting as well. Additionally, international and exchange students often have issues accessing services connected to **housing, health, and employment**.

To tackle these challenges, the students of the UNICA Student Conference consider that **universities and communities**, especially civil society, should work together to:

- Invest in the **internationalisation of higher education** by focusing on the development of **intercultural competence** in students and staff;
    - Offer **language and culture courses** to international and exchange students;
    - Create a **language tandem framework** for local, international and exchange students;
    - Enable international and exchange students to learn more about the culture of their host city/country by participating in **activities** such as visits to cultural and natural heritage spots, traditional dance lessons, food making workshops, etc;
    - Train the staff to facilitate **intercultural dialogue** and teach in **intercultural classrooms**;

- Implement a **Code of Conduct** and equip the staff to handle discriminatory behaviour.
- Ensure that the international and exchange students can **volunteer** as well as **participate** in the **activities** of civil society organisations active in the local community;
    - Ensure that the international and exchange students can **find and access community engagement activities** and opportunities via a platform, e.g. Erasmus+ App;
- Have a **funding mechanism** for student organisations facilitating community engagement activities for international and exchange students.
- Create a **framework** and a **recognition mechanism** for community engagement activities conducted as extracurricular activities;
    - **Recognition** can be reflected in diploma supplements, certificates, badges or credits;
    - Create a development path for international and exchange students to be able to connect the **competences** they develop by attending specific community engagement activities for the purpose of **assessment** and **certification** via a platform, e.g. Erasmus Skills
- Ensure that the international students can **form student representative bodies** to speak for themselves and their needs when it comes to the matters connected to academic life and life on campus;
    - Make sure that the international students can **join and participate** in the activity of existing student bodies and organisations, e.g. volunteering, applying for positions.
- Ensure more **spots** for international and exchange students in student **dormitories**, matching them in the rooms with the local students.
- Keep a database of **trustworthy accommodation providers** to assist the international and exchange students in finding suitable accommodation.
- Ensure that the international and exchange students can **access student job opportunities** on and off campus.
- Ensure that the **mental health services** are accessible to the international and exchange students, as well as keep a database of **mental health providers** working with internationals.

Topic 7

How can universities and cities work together to improve students' life?

in **Eduardo Freitas, NOVA University Lisbon**

*In collaboration with***:**

Kajanovičová Karin (Comenius University in Bratislava), Larina Varvara and Anastasiia Rakhimova (National Research University Higher School of Economics), Ermelinda Muçaj (University of Tirana), Jenny Nordlund (University of Stockholm), Alexandra Soulioti and Tsori Nektaria Tsori (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens)

Studying at a university comes with several challenges, many of these aggravated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The first barrier **students** face is the **financial demand** that is necessary to support **University fees, housing, transportation** and **daily expenses**.

Another strain students need to deal with is the **stress and pressure** that comes with entering a highly competitive environment like Universities, that affects one's **mental health** and can hereby negatively impact the students well-being and academic performance.

However, life is not all about classes and exams, and students look forward to an **active and enjoyable experience at University**.

Alongside the challenges students face, **Cities** and **Universities** also want to provide the necessary means to make themselves **attractive for new students** who will be part of the local communities.

To solve these challenges, the students of the UNICA Student Conference consider that **Cities** and **Universities** should work together in order to:

- develop a job centre system that provides **job opportunities** for new graduates and current students; **internships** and **volunteering opportunities:**
  - students that enroll in these tasks should be rewarded with reduced fees or scholarships;

○ employers are also rewarded with tax reductions and other aids;

● financially support students through **scholarships**, **loans** and other mechanisms such as lending school supplies, easily accessible through one federal platform containing <u>all financial aid offers</u>;

● Subsidize parties that help with fair **accommodation** for students: **host family programmes, public residencies** and **landlords;**

● Provide students with an **accessible, affordable/free of charge psychological aid service**, widely publicized each semester and capable of answering the individual students' needs;

● Raise **awareness and normalize an open conversation about mental health** within the students' and local community regularly, through campaigns, informative brochures and lectures.

● Organise **leisure activities** for students to develop their social and cultural identities, alleviating stress and allowing them to become better professionals and citizens;

● Actively **listen to students opinions**, through their representatives and periodic polls.

Topic 8

Formal and informal learning: Innovative pedagogical approaches prompted by the COVID-19 crisis

in **Kristel Jakobson, European Students' Union**

In collaboration with:

Jacopo Geremicca (Stockholm University), Augustė Grakavinaitė and Neda Žutautaitė (Vilnius University), Elina Khattap, Christina Panayi, Christodoulou Elpida and Christina Stylianidou (University of Cyprus), Jana Mlíchová (Charles University), Evangelia Nikoloudakis (Free University of Berlin), Fabian Villegas (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid)

The world of higher education had to adapt to the COVID-19 crisis that hit the entire society rather unexpectedly. It prompted many changes in different fields of studies, both theoretical and practical.

Nowadays, the terms hybrid learning, mastering of online tools and conservation of one's mental health are essential to working in education. **Hybrid learning is defined as the combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning[1].** Driven from that, new resources must be mastered by teachers and learners to adapt to new ways of learning. Thus, it is of most importance to not only **discover proper online learning tools** from various platforms, but to ensure as well **the quality of online modules and classes.** In the midst of all of it, **mental wellbeing** must be set as a priority for all higher educational institutions to make sure that the studies are effective, rather than harmful for students' or teachers' health.

- The students of UNICA find hybrid learning to be a great method for theoretical subjects and an effective way for self-preparation. However some practical activities (e.g. seminars or laboratories) ought to be implemented in person to ensure student's competences. Thus, **hybrid learning can be part of any field of study, without significant limitations**. As hybrid learning does require an extra effort from the lecturer's side, it is recommended that the

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[1] *Dictionary.* "Hybrid learning." https://www.dictionary.com/browse/hybrid-learning

higher education institution should guide the lecturer through it, providing necessary skills, training and tools to offer a proper inclusive hybrid method of studying to the students.

- The students of UNICA emphasize the importance of finding new ways to **increase awareness about the different options of tools** and **encourage universities to further train their staff** with at least the basic skills of the most common or useful tools. Those tools could provide new methods of evaluation, which are not only based on mark schemes, but mostly to the competences and the capabilities achieved from the part of the students.

- The students of UNICA stress the importance of **enhancing the mental health support system of the higher educational institutions and stress the importance of psychological consultations and support**. Hence, it is vital at these times to step up support for counselling with psychologists, scholarships, training academics, tutoring and peer-to-peer support, which universities could better finance and coordinate.
  - It is emphasised that the organisation of social activities (sport events, theatre, concerts etc.) is encouraged as it gives the students the opportunity to socialize and relax and thus fight depression and anxiety by bringing them together.[2]
  - The students of UNICA also recognize that students should actively engage in mental health related topics, so that they can be capable of cooperating with the university, in order to find the appropriate solutions to today's reality.

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[2] *Harvard Health Publishing. Harvard Medical School.* "Exercise is as effective as antidepressants in some cases."

https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/exercise-is-an-all-natural-treatment-to-fight-depression

Topic 9

Challenges and opportunities of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary education

in   **Joana Amado, NOVA University Lisbon**

In collaboration with:

Emma Berndsen (Universiteit van Amsterdam), Eleni-Anna Bozini (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens) Rodrigo Hernandez Sordi and Sanghamitra Chattopadhyay Mukherjee (University College Dublin), Éva Kaponya and Ana Sofia Souto (NOVA University Lisbon), Giulio Morelli (University of Rome "Foro Italico"), Valentina Parrotta and Benjamin Rochat (Université de Lausanne)

Nowadays the university culture promotes an unhealthy competitive environment instead of openness to collaborate. We know collaboration is essential to tackle the major problems we face in our world, from climate change, to the rising global inequality. These problems are so big and complex, that we need people from every field of society just to assess and understand them. That's where inter and transdisciplinary work enters: as an essential tool to be adopted by universities who want to keep up with our rapidly changing world. This is an inclusive method of work, which relies on people from different areas, experts and academics, students and non-academics. Inter and transdisciplinary education can lead to more open structures, both in terms of learning and of sharing knowledge. It not only facilitates communication, but also critical thinking and development of synthetic thought. Nevertheless, there are still a lot of challenges to overcome in our society to be able to fully implement these methods of work, from the need of a cultural shift, to funding and curriculum changes.

Unica Students Conference calls on **Governments** and **Universities** to:

- Promote equality in University from early on: ban the excessive use of rankings between academia, normalize courses and the idea that every field is important in its aim.
- Offer positive motives, such as means and financial support, to young people, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, to join seminars on transdisciplinary and sustainable education.
- Dedicate funds to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work by targeted grants or premiums, which can be done by reaching out to not only governments but also the private sector and promote these type of research as a sustainable solution.

- Guarantee access to all the tools and equipment needed for inter and transdisciplinary education to work.

- Promote a preparatory phase for students to take part in before starting interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary projects and courses, making sure everyone has the basic levels of knowledge, evaluated through standardized measures.

- Promote quality control for basic levels of communication, cooperation and soft skills development to guarantee that inter and transdisciplinary work lives up to high standards.

- Provide lifelong learning education to teachers, guaranteeing they know how to teach in an adequate and updated manner. This can come from non academic experts.

- Ensure cooperation of different departments to offer elective digital or physical courses with different perspectives on the same topic.

- Develop more elective interdisciplinary courses, with predefined themes, helping students from any field of study to have a more in-depth understanding of the problems. The course must be impactful, relevant to society and open to work with non-academics to build common knowledge. Gradually incorporate such courses into the curriculum.

- Develop and promote a transversal elective curriculum that allows students to explore non-formal education and develop their soft-skills;

- Create debate groups and promote think tanks between students from different fields, academics and non-academics. These groups must be challenged with problem solving tasks and be prompted to collaborate with each other to reach new solutions.

- Raise awareness and visibility to put inter and transdisciplinary work in the public agenda and to frame problems according to the logic of the public policy cycle to ensure efficient contribution. It should start gradually:
  - First promoting small webinars, then conferences and symposiums between students and experts to explore the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach in education.
  - Webinars, conferences and symposiums must focus on an interdisciplinary vision of any subject, while also focus on a transdisciplinary approach by inviting experts from all fields, including non-academic stakeholders.
  - They should also aim at the dissemination of academic projects that have incorporated inter/transdisciplinary approaches.
  - Universities should give the opportunity to have student's led webinars and conferences.

- Promote a stakeholders approach with an impact assessment when it comes to non-

academics, so they can be a viable part of the transdisciplinary approach.

- Promote inter and transdisciplinary research projects, involving researchers, teachers from different backgrounds, including non-academics, offering PhD topics on urgent issues and relevant opportunities. Collaborations with different universities and sectors, including the private sector, are necessary, to develop these projects, as a way to raise needed resources.

- Build and coordinate a network for inter and transdisciplinary research projects and dedicate a working group to incubate and mentor new initiatives projects. The working group should include:

  o Students who are doing interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research to offer their input.

  o Inter and transdisciplinary experts;

  o At a final stage, include the interested university community, recruited by their skillset and preferably at the start of their research career as to make them involved in more than one field form early on.

- Dedicate a task force with inter and transdisciplinary experts to explore showcased projects, analyse the determining success factors and derive the best practice recommendations and guidelines for such projects. Disseminate findings through reports, conferences, and regular webinars to boost outreach.

Topic 10

Jobs in the digital era: the role of Universities

in **Bruno Marques, NOVA University Lisbon**

In collaboration with:

Chrysovalanto Loizidou (University of Cyprus), Giulia Riccardi (Sapienza University of Rome), Marime Gjoka (University of Tirana), Michaela Hrotekova (Comenius University in Bratislava), Syed Bukhari (Universiteit van Amsterdam)

Higher education has never been more accessible. Allowing students from different backgrounds to learn and debate new ideas in an engaging and collegial fashion. At its essence universities are a place of self-discovery and personal growth. They also perform the paramount task of serving as a "launching pad" to professional success, giving students the skills they need to thrive in the job market.

Nevertheless, the fast-paced digitalization and computational developments in our societies have made ever so more apparent the need to adapt universities and their educational offering to these new realities. This transformation, already in full swing, has been expedited by COVID-19. Such massive transformations, namely in remote work, are likely to stay after the pandemic crisis, creating the need for a more developed IT infrastructure, as well as the supporting skills and knowledge. Universities must, thus, offer the courses and skills needed for the jobs of tomorrow, not the past. So, one must ask: What should be the role of universities in a digital society? We believe that the following ideas might bring about the change we want to see in universities:

- **Update course content** with new forward-looking material and data, **reimagine the current methodology** with learning models that encourage discussion such as the flipped classroom methodology or based on concepts such as the BarCamp, universities can further promote debate and cultural awareness with seminars, debates, cultural clubs and the acquisition of digital and soft skills (by increasing course offer, offering a common modules geared towards these skills, or by implementing micro-credential systems);

- **Capacitation program for faculty** in digital and interpersonal skills, furthermore these skills and pedagogical aptitude should be as relevant for hiring decisions as research output,

universities should also realign their priorities to create incentives for faculty to deliver a better learning experience;

- **Allow students more freedom in their studies** with fully remote and blended learning becoming an option in most universities, and with universities offering more student-jobs and being more receptive to a working student status;

- **Foster student integration in the job market** with comprehensive counselling and career advice (a team of specialized HR personnel to help students with CVs, motivation letters, interviews, career planning and advice), partnerships with the private sector and NGOs (activities such as case studies, company visits, as well as joint educational programs, internships and traineeships) and the creation of an online platform to advertise jobs and other programs to students, namely from partner organizations and corporate sponsors.

Resources

- Website of the UNICA Student Conference

- Presentation of the Declaration at the closing session of the UNICA Student Conference

- inNOVAtion at UNICA experts webinar with Sue Black and Peretz Lavie

- Presentation of the topics by the Chairs at the first warm-up meeting (plenary session)

  - Part 1

  - Part 2

- Information about previous UNICA Student Conferences

- "A Despedida" music video by Tuna Académica da NOVA Information Management School

- "Black Days, Long Nights" music video by Green Leather

- Website UNICA

- Website NOVA

- Website ESN

- Website ESU

- Website IYNF

Snapshots from the Conference
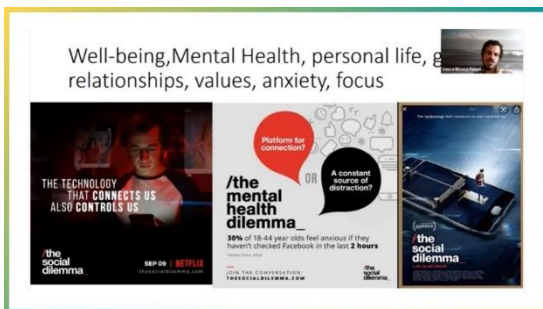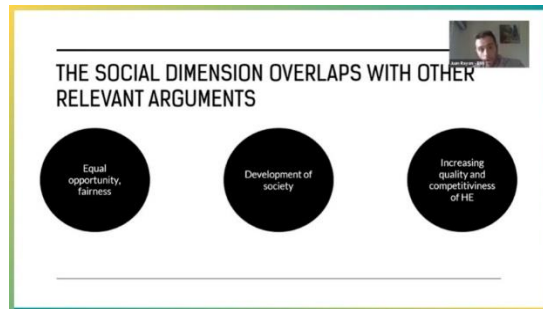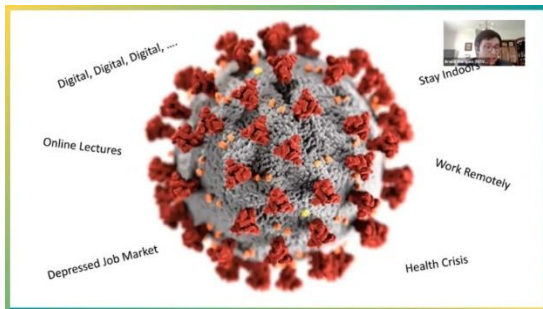
Chairs of the Fora present the topics at the first warm-up meeting.

The warm-up meetings between mid-April and early June were part of the preparatory phase of the Conference. Preparation focused on identifying the challenges and opportunities in each of the topics, whereas the Fora in July were dedicated to finding solutions and how to seize opportunities, resulting in the set of recommendations.

Professor Sue Black and Professor Peretz Lavie during the "InNOVAtion at UNICA Experts Webinar" – 5 July 2021

Ahead of the Conference, students had the opportunity to engage with two renowned experts in the area of Higher Education: Professor Sue Black and Professor Peretz Lavie.

Student delegates in the main session of the UNICA Student Conference.

For discussion of the topics and preparation of the recommendations, students would go into break out rooms according to the topics they chose.

At the end of each day, the Chairs gathered to compile all conclusions.

During the Conference, only students can participate in the discussions.

Academic tutors and contact people from the students' universities, as well as the Coordinators of UNICA Working Groups, join only on the final session to listen to the conclusions of each group.
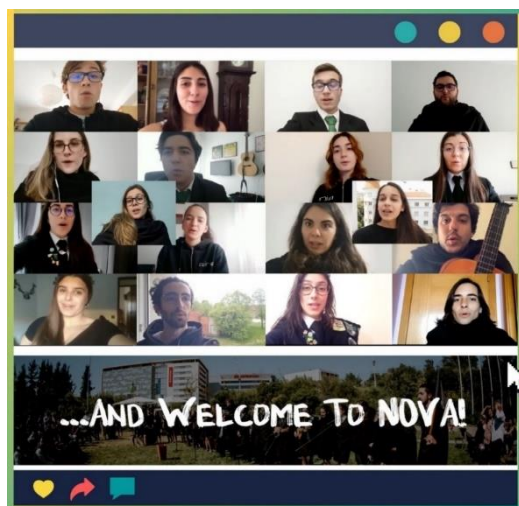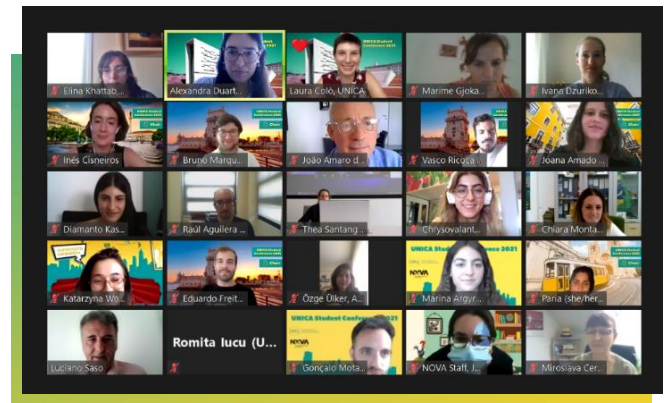
Tuna Universitária from NOVA Information Management School welcomes participants to the UNICA Student Conference

Traditional Portuguese musical group of university students welcomed the participants with a version of their original song "A Despedida" recorded during quarantine.
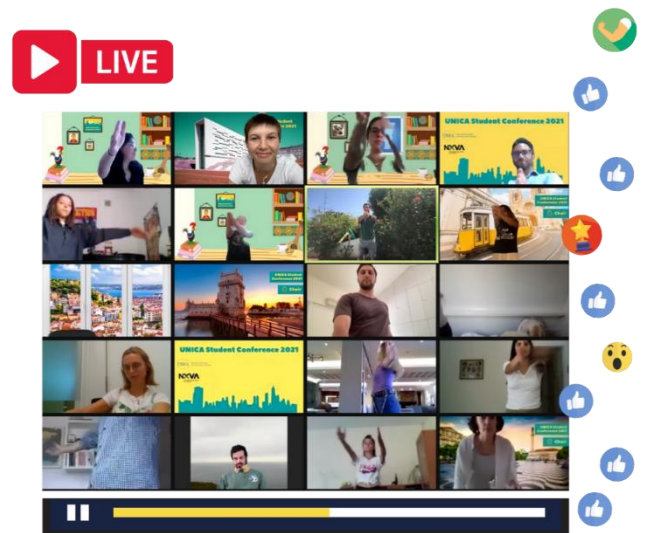
NOVA Sport promotes a stretching activity during the Conference

The sports division of NOVA University boosted everyone's energy with a *deskexercise* routine!

The band Green Leather plays at the closing of the Conference

The winning band of the NOVA Bands Competition, organised by NOVA University Lisbon, recorded a version of their song "Black Days, Long Nights".

Winner of the Photo Competition "The Capital City Through Your Eyes" – July 2021

Participants were challenged to capture the capital city of their universities in a photo competition as a way to connect their peers and overcome physical distance. The UNICA community on Facebook voted on their favourites to win.

1st place

Title: \"The divided city\"

Elina Khattab, University Of Cyprus

Nicosia is the capital city of Cyprus and gets the credit of being one of our most historic cities. A walk down the streets of the old city will reveal elegant buildings and myriad of traditional restaurants, bars, and art-cafes. The old city, through its buildings and narrow streets highlights the city\'s ancient history. Eleftheria square dominating the center of the city is a cannot -miss!
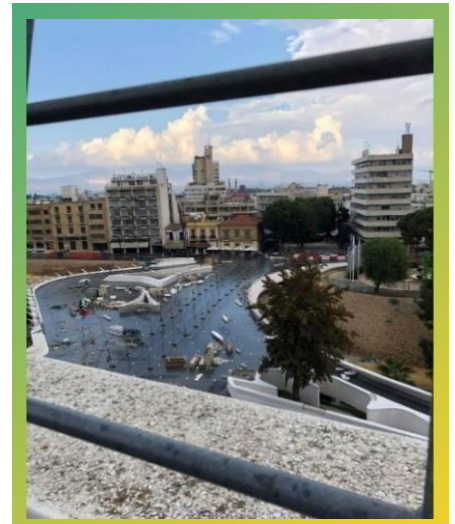
2nd place

Title: On the Edge to Freedom

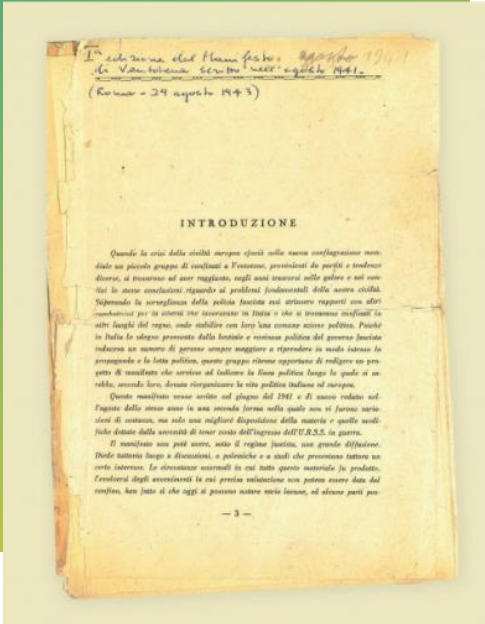**Roman David Udler, Vilnius University**

3rd place

Title: An october afternoon

Marime Gjoka, University of Tirana

About the UNICA Student Conference 2023

The UNICA Student Conference 2023 will be held in Italy, in a small Mediterranean Island, with around 500 habitants, under the name of Ventotene. The Conference will be organised in cooperation with Roma Tre University.

Ventotene is a special place, with a huge historical memory. In this small island the embryo of the idea of Europe has been set throughout the Ventotene Manifesto, wrote by Altiero Spinelli in 1941.

Eager to participate as a University? Contact the UNICA Secretariat:

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alexandra.duarte@unica-network.eu