

Nothing Is Constant Except Change
Academia's Digital Transformation

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'Nothing is constant except change', said the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, yet for a long time this quote appeared not to be applicable to higher education, with universities and other educational institutions considered highly reluctant to change. This, however, changed overnight with COVID-19, shaking up the sector, compelling it to move courses and entire programmes into the online sphere, in many cases overnight. Thus academia proved adaptable and flexible when there was a need.

Beyond its digitalisation process, higher education has been confronted with a series of profound challenges for some time now, such as an increase in worldwide competition, a decrease in financial means and (public) funding, as well as a more general questioning of its overall mission and broader role within society (Kaplan 2014; Pucciarelli and Kaplan 2019). Moreover, its digital transformation – some even speak of disruption – began long before the pandemic. As early as 2012, the *New York Times* solemnly proclaimed the Year of the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course; Kaplan 2017), predicting that online courses taught on platforms such as Coursera or Udacity would have the potential to disrupt the entire higher education sector (Kaplan and Haenlein 2016). Until now, this had not been the case; but the dynamic launched by COVID-19 might be a game-changer.

In this book's first chapter, I will show that with the pandemic's arrival, actually 'Everything has changed but nothing has changed' at all. Furthermore, consistent with the saying 'Nothing changes if nothing changes', the author espouses digitalisation as demanding real innovation beyond simply transferring offline courses into the cybersphere. At the same time, we should also avoid altering everything, as 'All change is not growth, as all movement is not forward'. Finally, this chapter focuses on the quote 'Things do not change; we change', advocating for academia's need to make a few changes to be able to definitively benefit from its digital transformation (Kaplan 2020, 2021).

‘Everything Has Changed, Yet Nothing Has Changed’ – Mark Hamill

You might have heard claims that COVID-19 enabled higher education’s digitalisation, which is valid to a certain extent. However, we must be clear that the necessary technology making online teaching and learning possible has existed for a long time. MOOCs, SPOCS (Small Private Online Courses), SMOCs (Synchronous Mass Online Courses) and SSOCs (Synchronous Small Online Courses) have been on the market for years now (Kaplan and Haenlein 2016). Artificial intelligence (AI) has already entered higher education via adaptive learning or AI-driven teaching assistants, such as Georgia Tech’s Jill Watson (Kaplan 2021).

However, what changed due to the pandemic was the mindset of administration and faculty, who were largely reluctant to stand in front of a camera and go digital. Even hard-line enemies of online teaching and adamant opponents were compelled to take their first steps into the newly imposed digital world of pedagogy. Several among them are ‘converts’ from such entrenched opposition to digital instruction to being strong advocates of online pedagogy’s possibilities. Even the most vehement adversaries among university administrators have been compelled to accept the new digital era of higher education and by now understand its many advantages and benefits (Kaplan 2020). So ultimately, at hand is a simple change of heart as much as a change in technologies. Therefore, we can state on this level: ‘Everything has changed but nothing has changed.’

‘Nothing Changes If Nothing Changes’

In our new era, higher education should avoid other sectors’ mistakes and understand that ‘going digital’ means much more than merely moving an offline course onto a digital platform. Or to quote Radamiz, ‘Nothing changes if nothing changes.’ To truly benefit from academia’s digitalisation, genuine pedagogical innovation is needed; changes on the margins will not suffice (Thibierge 2020). To give just one example, think of programmes wherein first-year students attend online courses to acquire the respective domain’s basic knowledge while working part time at a company. The programme then could continue with a full-time on-campus period during which the students would dedicate their time to in-class discussions, the hands-on application of previously learned concepts and exchanges between fellow students in and outside the classroom, to add a networking perspective. Finally, the programme’s last year could

subsequently be spent working at the company, with the university still providing online tutoring and coaching (Kaplan 2020).

An additional application concerns multi-campus institutions, such as my employer and alma mater, ESCP (European School of Commerce Paris), which, as its name indicates, originated in France but now has campuses in Berlin, London, Madrid, Turin and Warsaw (Kaplan 2014, 2018a). Applying virtual elements could foster an additional connection between such campuses (Kaplan 2018b), as one could imagine, for example, core courses simultaneously taught at multiple sites bringing together students from various physical locations remotely working on group assignments as team members. Nurturing such a sense of closeness enabled by digital technology (Mucharraz and Venuti 2020) is also applicable to further contexts such as international exchange periods, where students physically spend time at partner institutions all over the world, or during internship periods, during which universities often lose contact with their students, who, nonetheless and ironically, spend many hours online.

'All Change Is Not Growth, as All Movement Is Not Forward' – Ellen Glasgow

A second mistake higher education should avoid besides merely transferring offline courses onto online platforms and thinking they're done (Kaplan 2009; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010) is to go to the other extreme and seek to digitalise everything. The quote 'All change is not growth, as all movement is not forward', is pertinent in this context, as aforementioned, the online world demands genuine pedagogical innovations. In other words: going digital has to make sense. There are more than a few situations where a live course is far more appropriate and efficacious than is an online course. Moreover, let's not forget that higher education is not only about learning and teaching but also about exchanging ideas with fellow students and faculty, as well as creating lifelong networks and friendships.

It would be fatal to believe that physical university buildings are a thing of the past owing to digitalisation. For the most part, socialising is still easier to do live than it is virtually, so future buildings will need to adapt to our new reality. Instead of large lecture halls, more space will be dedicated to teamwork as well as interfacing between fellow students, professors, alumni and the entire community built around a university. Accordingly, buildings need to foster a stimulating student life and radiate an enjoyable ambiance and climate. Only then will they motivate students and faculty to physically come to university, a *sine qua non* for their developing a strong attachment to their alma mater (Kaplan 2021).

‘Things Do Not Change; We Change’ – Henry David Thoreau

To conclude, while the COVID-19 pandemic has inarguably accelerated academia’s digital transformation, as aforementioned, it was actually a change of heart that spurred this, more than a modification of the environment or possibilities enabled by digital technologies. Thus ‘Things do not change; we change’ is a particularly relevant sentiment. It also must be stressed that there is still much to do. Although universities put their entire curricula online in almost no time, it did not mean that course quality was perfect; rather, the opposite was the case. However, during lockdown, few students complained about course quality, being instead grateful for universities’ pivoting in these extraordinary times. Not only that, but surprisingly few faculty members requested clarifications about intellectual property rights or remuneration policies concerning teaching online. This atmosphere will definitely evolve in the future, and universities worldwide will face relevant academic, budgetary, legal and operational questions (Kaplan 2020).

Universities will have to reflect upon these questions very seriously in order to transform COVID-19 into a genuine opportunity and not find themselves threatened by the ongoing digital transformation and potential disruption of the higher education sector. On the one hand, higher education’s digitalisation will generate new potential revenue sources, as the market will become even more global than currently is the case (Kaplan 2017). However, as a logical consequence, the higher education environment will also become more competitive (Kaplan and Pucciarelli 2016; Pucciarelli and Kaplan 2016) with online courses demanding considerable resources for their production, to mention just some of the issues that higher education institutions will be facing.

This book’s intention is to respond to some of those questions, to elucidate further points of matters essential to undertake, as well as to foster and encourage constructive discussion among the field’s research community, leadership teams, higher education institutions worldwide, investors and edtech (educational technology) actors, teaching professionals and employees within the sector but also the broader public with a stake in (higher) education’s future. I hope you enjoy this compilation as much as I enjoyed putting it together. I hope you find the various authors’ contributions as exciting and inspiring as I believe them to be, being more than grateful for their valuable insights and input. In brief, I hope you like this book as much as I do.

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