



**POLICY BRIEF**

# **Cultural Studies and the Transnationalization of the European Higher Education Area in the Age of Digital Learning**

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## **1. Introduction**

This document is based on the research experience made by the DETECT consortium in the field of learning innovation in Higher Education. As a large transnational and multi-disciplinary project, DETECT has found itself in an ideal position to evaluate the benefits and critical challenges that are met in the process of applying contemporary connective technologies to the creation of a transnational learning community. Answering a Horizon 2020 call that asked to channel new research on contemporary European culture in 'innovative learning material adapted to contemporary media and art consumption patterns', DETECT Learning Community has tested the potential of Virtual Learning Environments such as MOODLE and MOOC for transnational learning activities. Several challenges have emerged, most of which related to the specificities of learning and research in Cultural Studies as compared to other fields of study. This policy brief addresses such difficulties from three related angles: (i) multilingualism as a major challenge to be addressed in the process of knowledge transfer from Cultural Studies research into teaching; (ii) the problem of digital infrastructure, which—although not exclusively found in the knowledge fields covered by Cultural Studies—has peculiar consequences in this domain; and (iii) how Cultural Studies can

contribute to the transnationalization of the European Higher Education Area, particularly in the context of the European Universities Alliances.

## **2. Evidence and analysis**

### **2.1 Methodology**

The evidence discussed in this document is drawn from the research in digital pedagogy conducted by the DETECT consortium as a transnational, transdisciplinary, multilingual community of practice during the 46-month duration of the project. This experimentation has involved the preparation of different types of learning materials in English, including modules on both MOODLE and MOOC Virtual Learning Environments, the delivery of a few courses, both traditional and online, on DETECT topics at different universities and in different European languages, and the organization of a transnational online workshop involving students at the universities of Bologna, Limoges, and Debrecen. The results of such experimentation have been discussed by the members of the consortium by email, video conferences and project meetings, to identify common challenges emerged during the activities and come up with effective suggestions for solutions. During this process the consortium's elaboration has been complemented by desk research on state-of-the-art Digital Pedagogy studies and confronted with current European policies, especially with regard to Digital Education.

### **2.2 Multilingualism as a challenge for the transfer of European research knowledge into teaching in higher education institutions**

- **PROMOTING THE TRANSFER OF RESEARCH KNOWLEDGE TO HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS IN THE HUMANITIES, AND SPECIFICALLY CULTURAL STUDIES.**

The Humanities, and particularly Cultural Studies, comprise the study fields where the values of social justice, diversity, inclusiveness, and the problems of intercultural and multi-ethnic coexistence, are exposed and debated through the analysis of cultural texts. This puts these disciplines in a crucial position regarding the generation and dissemination of the cosmopolitan attitude that is needed to achieve a more resilient and cohesive society. At the same time, the social impact of humanistic research depends on a 'transfer' of research results in different national and regional languages and cultures to a much more fundamental degree than is the case in STEM fields, which can count on formal, universal languages that can be understood by all scholars/students in the fields. But the function of natural languages within the Humanities is not simply instrumental, or just a means for meaning. On the contrary, natural languages and their specificities are objects of perpetual investigation in the process of expressing research results, their specific nuances vital to the effective communication of complex thinking.

In responding to a Horizon 2020 call that asked for the creation of ‘innovative learning materials adapted to contemporary media and art consumption patterns’, the partners of DETECT consortium—representing 10 different European languages—took up the challenge to produce several different types of digital learning materials adopting English as their vehicle language, as the only shared language that would have made it possible for them to co-design and collaboratively revise their research. However, not only using these materials in the classroom, with many students still not completely proficient in English, has proved quite difficult, but for teachers-researchers who are not native speakers themselves, writing in English has often resulted in a quite frustrating sacrifice of complexity.

Encouraging European research in Cultural Studies to be conducted and disseminated to European Higher Education students in the different natural languages that are spoken in the continent should be regarded as a major priority by the EU. Since European collaborative research needs to be conducted in English for practical reasons of transnational communication among scholars, actions to help the transfer of results from pure research published in English to university classes in other European languages should be envisaged and pursued, keeping in mind that this process requires a lot of time, effort, and organization. Transferring European research in Cultural Studies to HE students does not simply amount to a process of linguistic translation; on the contrary, in order for complex research results to be passed on to international HE students, as well as to local scholarly communities, they need to undergo a more complex process of cultural adaptation.

As an example, the digital learning materials created in English by DETECT teachers-researchers during the project could allow for the creation of a multilingual digital textbook on Contemporary European Noir, for use as a pan-European Open Educational Resource for HE undergraduate courses in Cultural Studies. This is only an example of how research results of many other European projects in the SSH sectors could effectively be passed on to the next generation of Cultural & Creative operators in the different territories of the EU. For this to become true, specific actions should be taken by the EU to provide measures to support the transfer of research in European Cultural Studies to transnational teaching in HE, particularly in those disciplinary fields, such as the Humanities, where linguistic specificities are crucial for the expression of complex thinking.

- **TRANSNATIONAL DIGITAL LIBRARIES OF AUDIOVISUAL CULTURAL HERITAGE FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING EUROPEAN CULTURAL STUDIES.**

Our research has shown that the exposure of European HE students in Cultural Studies to contemporary popular narrative products from other European countries is generally quite low. This is consistent with the results of DETECT TV audience survey (see DETECT Deliverable 5.1), which has shown that European TV crime series are still significantly less popular among European ‘avid crime viewers’ than both domestic and Anglo-American content. Although this situation is rooted in the more general and complex problems of ‘exposure diversity’ discussed in DETECT Policy brief on ‘Cultural diversity on VoD platforms’, it has specific implications for teaching European Cultural Studies. Currently, university teachers in these disciplines and their students do not have easy

access to transnational digital libraries of audiovisual cultural heritage. Although the public national TV channels of some countries have put parts of their archives online, these libraries are only accessible from within national borders. While the new Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market has established an exception for the use of copyrighted materials for educational purposes, the issue of cross-border uses remains unsolved.

Even within their national contexts, European states appear to be backward in this area, particularly in comparison with the United Kingdom, where students at educational institutions provided with a licence from the [Educational Recording Agency](#) are provided with access to [BOB-Box of Broadcasts](#), a huge online library of over 2 millions of on-demand radio and TV broadcasts. Although of a more limited scope, in Europe the most extensive initiative to offer transnational access to a library of audiovisual heritage took place in the context of [Europeana](#), whose catalogue includes over 50,000 video items. Yet most of these items are either silent or documentary films. Between 2011 and 2018, Europeana also supported the [European Film Gateway Project](#). However, of all the numerous institutions involved in this project, only a few have uploaded a significant number of videos, and mainly from their silent and documentary collections. Another initiative that is worth mentioning is [Rendez-vous Play](#), a free online catalogue of 150, both classical and more recent French films that the Institut français is currently offering to Italian university students. The platform also includes the films proposed in the [CinEd catalogue](#). Born in 2015 out of a project co-funded by the Creative Europe Media programme (action Support for film education) and led again by the Institute Français, CinEd sees the participation of 8 European countries. 'Its objective is to help the greatest possible number of European youths aged 6 to 19 discover European cinema', by providing access to 'the wealth and diversity of European cinema' while 'developing young people's ability to watch and listen, to compare and connect'.

## 2.3 The problem of infrastructure

- **SMART TOOLS FOR LEARNING EUROPEAN CULTURAL STUDIES.**

To meet the purpose to develop 'innovative learning materials' DETECT teachers-researchers have experimented with a variety of digital tools for knowledge sharing, knowledge mapping and knowledge transformation. This experience has disclosed problems in terms of the availability and local integration of 'smart' online pedagogical tools. Today, European students and teachers can easily choose among a variety of online tools to create and organize content and enhance interaction that can easily be embedded in their MOODLE and MOOC learning environments in a fraction of the time needed to gather, transform, and share data within these systems, and with great profit in terms of graphic presentation of the information. Whiteboards, infographics templates, mental maps, timelines, data visualization and video-annotation tools, virtual collections of online resources: a simple query on a search engine retrieves dozens of different services that educators can easily use to enrich their Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) with dynamic content and model a more engaging, student-centred learning experience. Quite importantly, using these tools also helps

students to become familiar with the research methods of Digital Humanities and acquire the basic and intermediate digital skills that are today necessary to thrive in our contemporary society.

Now, practically all these tools are today provided by private, pay-for-service platforms based in the US, with just a couple of them (Answergarden and Videoant) just completely free of charge but still based in non-EU countries (respectively Switzerland and the US). To make their submissions, or to otherwise interact with the content in these virtual spaces, students must register on the websites. Nowadays is close to impossible for a teacher in Cultural Studies to assign students with online digital tasks that do not require registration on private websites based outside the EU. Although most of these services allow for creating a certain number of instances for free, educational needs such as the number of units in a course, or the number of students in a class rapidly bring a teacher to exceed these limits. As a result, an indefinite, but certainly not small a number of European teachers in Cultural Studies are now paying individual subscriptions to educational software-as-service platforms, to enrich their VLEs with more easy-to-use, more dynamic, more interactive tools than those available in either the MOODLE or the MOOC platforms. At the same time, the business of high-grade digital content and services for educational purposes, also known as the EdTech Industry, has been growing steadily since the 2000s, creating a situation where the richest schools and university can access the best resources, while the poorest have to rely on the goodwill of individual teachers to provide students with advanced online tools, which nevertheless still require them to release their data to private services outside the EU.

- **TACKLING THE NEED OF AN OPEN AND SECURE DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR TRANSNATIONAL LEARNING.**

The challenge described in the above paragraph is just a small yet revealing finding in a more general picture that sees today practically all European universities still depending upon private services based outside the EU for their digital educational activities. The ambition to create alternatives to the domination of the US 'hyperscale companies' that dominate the EU market for digital services and attain 'digital sovereignty' is a top priority of the new European Digital Plan, pursued in particular through the GAIA-X project for the creation of an 'open, transparent and secure digital ecosystem, where data and services can be made available, collated and shared in an environment of trust'. This is also a precondition for building common channels on which to successfully develop online transnational learning activities bringing together students at different European schools and universities. The new Digital Education Action Plan programme proves that there is awareness among European policymakers that secure, interoperable digital infrastructures are crucial to promote both digital literacy and cross-border online learning activities.

## 2.4 Transnationalizing Cultural Studies in the Digital Era

- **APPLYING CONNECTIVE TECHNOLOGIES TO THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA.**

Cultural studies can give an important contribution to foster transcultural knowledge among European HE students. Transnational asynchronous/blended courses approaching the diversity of European culture through the study of contemporary narrative works help students better understand other European cultures and peoples in more complex ways, beyond simplistic stereotypes and the superficial appeal of 'banal cosmopolitanism'. Moreover, each of the numerous articulations of the field (gender, race and ethnicity, disability, queer studies) has inclusiveness embedded as a core value and can thus contribute to strengthen Europe's internal cohesion. The students' feedbacks to the DETECT MOOC has shown that Cultural studies have the potential to provide excellent subject matters for transnational digital learning, although not necessarily in the form of massive or open courses.

Recent research has repeatedly indicated many criticalities in the performance of MOOCs as agents of a new age of free education for all. Besides low completion rates and the socioeconomic conditions that affect the student's ability to profit from digital learning, scholars also mention linguistic barriers as a major issue. Since most MOOCs, including the DETECT MOOC, are made in English, there is also a concern about the persisting trend of English-language culture and research to increase its leading position throughout the world. Our experience during the pandemic suggests that there may be much more interesting options than massive asynchronous, remote applications of the MOOC concept for applying connective technologies to the transnationalization of European HE. All the different solutions for digital and distance learning we have experimented during this period (streamed or recorded lessons, synchro-modal sessions and e-learning MOODLE or MOOC courses) have proven empirically to us that no technological tool or service can replace the face-to-face relation in the classroom, either physical or virtual, between the students and their teachers, since learners generally require human support and social contact to be able to successfully process the information and form a knowledge out of it. While the integration of digital tools, services and learning materials and the transnationalization of contemporary teaching practices are both crucial to educating the future generations of competent, cosmopolitan, and critically aware European citizens, this goal cannot be attained by simply putting digital objects online.

- **THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES ALLIANCES.**

In any event, the future of the application of digital technologies to the transnationalization of the European Higher Education Area is closely linked to the developments of the recently launched [European Universities Initiative](#). The European Universities Alliances formed under this action are the most adequate context where to design, organize and collaboratively deliver transnational learning activities at different linked locations, so as 'to bring together a new generation of creative Europeans able to cooperate across languages, borders and disciplines'.



### 3. Policy implications and recommendations

Based on the above evidence and analysis, the DETECT project suggests that the following actions are undertaken:

- **PROMOTING THE TRANSFER OF RESEARCH KNOWLEDGE TO HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS IN THE HUMANITIES, AND SPECIFICALLY CULTURAL STUDIES.**

Research in Cultural Studies typically generates complex knowledge that stimulates reflection on social justice, diversity, inclusiveness, as well as intercultural and multi-ethnic coexistence. This puts these disciplines in a crucial position regarding the generation and dissemination of the cosmopolitan attitude that is needed to achieve a more resilient and cohesive society. At the same time, the transfer of research knowledge to higher education students is slowed down by the complications of multilingualism, and the need to translate results in different languages, which, in turn, is due to Cultural Studies' special relation to natural languages.

- i. **Horizon R&I projects in the SSH sector should be encouraged to build follow-up plans to pass on their research results to the next generations of creatives and cultural operators** in the different territories of the EU, through different types of educational projects.
- ii. They should be **encouraged to apply for funding under the Erasmus+ programme** and particularly under the [Jean Monnet action](#). This action has traditionally mostly benefited Law and Political Science studies, but it could as well apply to projects in Cultural Studies. Calls should specifically address the need to not only produce Open Educational Resources, as the JM action already envisions, but also **foster research knowledge transfer in different languages**. This could help boost the impact of research in those fields that are best equipped to contribute to disseminate transcultural values among European citizens.

- **TRANSNATIONAL DIGITAL LIBRARIES OF EUROPEAN AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE**

More should be done to provide European students with greater opportunities to access audiovisual cultural products and heritage from across the continent. Digital technologies allow for easy transnational distribution of audiovisual content, but European students in Cultural Studies are still subject to national segregation as concerns their ability to access non-domestic audiovisual productions. Attempts to create open digital archives of European audiovisual heritage have been previously done in the context of various European projects, but they have regarded mostly historical heritage. To build something like the British platform BOB may prove impossible on the European scale, and the matter is complicated by any possible issue in terms of copyright law and technological infrastructure.

- iii. To deal with such complexity, **a Horizon project should be funded having the specific aim, not so much to build, but rather to study possible solutions to create a transnational digital library of European audiovisual content for educational use.**

- **SMART TOOLS FOR LEARNING EUROPEAN CULTURAL STUDIES**

Actions are needed to support innovation in learning methodologies across the European Higher Education Area. European students in Cultural Studies should be made able to familiarize with the research methods of Digital Humanities through the regular adoption, in their learning practice, of different types of 'smart tools' for online knowledge mapping, analysis and transformation, within a secure environment and without being compelled to release their data to foreign companies.

- iv. Since unfortunately practically all these now ubiquitous online tools are provided by for profit companies based outside the EU, to pursue the principle of [digital sovereignty](#) stated as one of the European Commission priorities for 2019-24, **projects should be encouraged to develop open 'smart toolkits' for educational use** within and beyond Digital Humanities-driven Cultural Studies.

- **AN OPEN AND SECURE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM FOR TRANSNATIONAL LEARNING**

Linked with the above, it is urgent to provide the Higher Education Education Area with an 'open, transparent and secure digital ecosystem, where data and services can be made available, collated and shared in an environment of trust', such as is currently being under development in the frame of the [GAIA X](#) project.

- v. While the new [Digital Education Action Plan](#) programme has included the development of 'a high-performing digital education ecosystem' as one of its two top priorities, we believe that this objective should be more precisely understood in terms of the development of a virtual environment 'where data and services can be made available, collated and shared in an environment of trust', as stated in the GAIA X mission. **Secure, interoperable digital infrastructures are crucial both to promote digital literacy and to deliver cross-border online learning activities**, such as described below.

- **APPLYING CONNECTIVE TECHNOLOGIES TO THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The potential of connective technologies for the transnationalization of the European Higher Education Area is far from having been fully deployed. While MOOCs are experiencing a decline



in their reputation as effective pedagogical tools, other more interesting perspectives on the gains of applying digital and distance learning technologies for the delivery of transnational learning activities have clearly emerged during the pandemic. Our experience has shown that the best way to introduce students in Cultural Studies to digital learning is not through asynchronous delivery models such as applied in MOOCs but through forms of blended or 'mixed' learning. This is even more important in transnational learning environments when the shared resources and tools are mostly in English and therefore need specific cultural adaptation to learning in other languages through the teacher's human mediation. **European HE institutions should be encouraged to envisage innovative ways to apply connective technologies to the creation of 'blended' transnational learning communities, that is, communities that exist both on- and offline**, both transnationally and locally, both on virtual platforms, where to share data, communicate and organize online streaming sessions, and in the physical classroom. Recommendations viii-xi offer a few suggestions about how this could be achieved in the context of the European Universities Alliances. More in general, MOOCs could be usefully reoriented from their supposedly universal (but English-speaking) audience to more specific categories of students by:

- vi. **promoting the creation of MOOCs in languages other than English;** and
- vii. **using MOOCs in the context of the Erasmus+ programmes.** Asynchronous courses specifically addressed to incoming Erasmus students could be offered by hosting institutions to provide them with notions related to the cultural history of the city, region, and country that are to host them during their stay. Other technologies, such as the GPS technology tested for the [DETECT app](#), could also be used to help either foreign or from-out-of-town students to familiarize with the cultures of their hosting cities. Similar initiatives could be pursued in cooperation with other local cultural and touristic institutions, such as museums or film archives, but also in connection with the [Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project](#), thus creating synergies that could help local cultural heritage to be known by young citizens from abroad.

- **THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES ALLIANCES**

MOOCs and other Virtual Learning Environments can have important areas of application in the context of the European Universities Alliances. Projects to introduce MOOCs to provide Master students at partner universities with joint microcredentials are already being implemented at different universities, for example within the [UNA Europa alliance](#). From our research experience, we suggest that other options to apply digital and distance learning technologies could and should be explored to build collaborative projects within the different EUA networks.

- viii. EUA networks should commit to promoting **twinning projects** between courses at different institutions. [eTwinning](#) is the name given to an Erasmus+ action started in 2005 to encourage European primary and secondary schools to collaborate through Information and

Communication Technologies. Since its inception, eTwinning has generated 129.540 projects in 225.562 schools around Europe. Similar **twinning initiatives should be encouraged also at the HE level through calls that could be launched within the EUAs or under other Erasmus+ actions** to promote virtual exchange between classes in Cultural Studies, and beyond. In this context,

- ix. **VLEs such as MOODLE could be used in cooperation by teachers and students at different institutions**, to structure shared repositories of digital learning materials and exercises about the topics in their twinned courses. Given the peculiarities of each educational context, the best results will be achieved by adopting this material in **twinned blended courses or seminars** at each institution, so that each class has its own professor delivering their course based on their specific approach to the shared topics and learning materials.
- x. Connective technologies such as videoconference applications or online forums could be used to create **opportunities for both synchronous and asynchronous communication between students** of the twinned courses. In addition, twinned courses could include a cycle of synchronous sessions to host teachers' lectures and students' presentations. Smart tools for online collaboration could be used to create stimulating assignments to twinned classes.
- xi. It must be acknowledged that building a project on similar lines is extremely challenging in the HE context. The apparently simple task to coordinate timetables for synchronous seminars is made difficult, and sometimes impossible, not only by the different timing of the academic year and degree programmes in the various countries, but more crucially by the short duration of most courses in the European Higher Education Area, especially following the Bologna Process and the introduction of the 3+2 system. To really foster transnationalization in this area, **special projects should be put in place across at least two semesters, keeping in due consideration the extra effort required from teachers to coordinate learning materials and syllabi.**

<b>PROJECT NAME</b>	DETECT - Detecting Transcultural Identities in European Popular Crime Narratives
<b>COORDINATOR</b>	Monica Dall'Asta, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy
<b>CONSORTIUM</b>	Alma Studiorum – Università di Bologna – UNIBO – Bologna, Italy Aalborg Universitet – AAU – Aalborg, Denmark Aarhus Universitet – AU – Aarhus, Denmark Bibliocité – [none] – Paris, France Debreceni Egyetem – UNIDEB – Debrecen, Hungary Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin GMBH – DFFB – Berlin, Germany Fonden VisitAarhus – [none] – Aarhus, Denmark Freie Universitaet Berlin – FUB – Berlin, Germany Katholieke Universiteit Leuven – KU Leuven – Leuven, Belgium Link Campus University di Roma – LCU – Rome, Italy Miso Film Aps – [none] – Copenhagen, Denmark Panepistimio Ioanninon – Uoi – Ioannina, Greece Umeå Universitet – UmU – Umeå, Sweden Universitatea din Bucuresti – UB – Bucharest, Romania Université de Limoges – UNILIM – Limoges, France Université Paris Nanterre – UPN – Paris, France The Queens University of Belfast – QUB – Belfast, Northern Ireland TV 2 Denmark A/S – TV 2 – Odense – Denmark
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<b>DURATION</b>	April 2018 – July 2021 (40 months) – extended until October 2021
<b>BUDGET</b>	EU contribution: €2,518,443.75.
<b>WEBSITE</b>	<a href="http://detect-project.eu">detect-project.eu</a>
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