
When students seize a crisis as an opportunity for change: solutions for post-Covid-19.

10TH OF JUNE 2021

Alternative Mobility Program by University of Geneva



Universitat
Pompeu Fabra
Barcelona

UH



UNIVERSITÉ
DE GENÈVE

UNIVERSITY OF
EXETER

Université 
de Montréal

Introduction

The **Alternative Mobility** program (AltMob) was launched by the University of Geneva in association with the Universities of Montreal, Barcelona, Hamburg and Exeter to preserve and enhance cooperation between students of the international academic world. Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic has prevented student mobility and thus cancelled social, intellectual and cultural exchanges. The AltMob program was innovative in the sense of creating **ten international teams**, each working on a specific solution, instead of only talking about problems. This program enabled youth to prepare for the road ahead – overcoming the Covid-19 crisis, looking forward to the professional world – and finding solutions.

The ten projects revolve around three main global issues: 1) Environment & Health, 2) Trust & Information and 3) Solidarity & Resilience.

Each group identified a **specific problem and elaborated a solution or mechanism to resolve or deal with it**. The outcomes of their work are various and range from the elaboration of a Plant Mosaic to a Citizen Consultative Network, or even the creation of Instagram informative accounts to avoid and prevent fake news.

Given student enthusiasm for this Alternative Mobility, for a new and unusual academic opportunity, as well as for the media coverage it attracted, this project should be taken as an example of the success of academic cooperation in times of crisis.

We hope that our message will be heard and that it will generate such initiatives in the future.

Context

It would not be an understatement to say that the Covid-19 pandemic took the world by storm. Multiple aspects of society are still being challenged now, and uncertainty about our future continues to grow day by day. In addition to revealing new weaknesses in our system, this crisis heightened existing ones, such as climate change, mental health or trust in the authorities. **The pandemic imposed multifaceted challenges on all of us, and especially the socio-ecological consequences are understood to be colossal.**

Also, **we students had to find new solutions to thrive in this difficult environment.** University is a land of opportunities to learn, to start new project or travel to another country. The last option was compromised for a lot of us due to Covid-19 travel restrictions. Places such as Sydney, Taiwan or Montreal were among the destinations and the dreams of new experiences. Unfortunately, that did not happen. We were forced to find new solutions to be productive, on how to make real experiences while staying in our room and find a way to make the world a better place.

Massive crises are an opportunity for ambitious innovation and we were all eager to have an impact over this semester.

By growing up and living in developed countries, we were privileged to travel but also to have access to academia and advanced technology, which enabled us to connect with students from all around the world, and team up to build a better future in this program called “Alternative Mobility”.

Together, through our belief in our ideas and action, we will move post-pandemic society forward.

Altmob – an academic program to move real-world issues forward.

Launched for the first time in January 2021, the Alternative Mobility program (AltMob) gathered around 40 students from European and North American universities, that aimed to use the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity for change. By first identifying global challenges, we have been able to propose innovative solutions, tackling issues such as the environmental crisis, the lack of resilience or inclusiveness in our societies. As the crisis highlighted flaws in several societal areas, the solutions we imagined are as diverse as all the identified societal problems we are facing.

This new program symbolizes an *exemplary solution for cooperation in times of crisis* for facing difficulties and proposing new initiatives. It has enabled us, as grassroots actors, to have a lasting impact on local and global issues. Several positive aspects can be drawn from this experience.

First, this new program allowed us to enjoy an international experience with other students and organizations scattered around the world, even though borders were closed. The diversity of participants in each team permitted the creation of an international dialogue around issues that we all had in common.

Furthermore, the innovative features of this program enabled us to gain new skills. Its interdisciplinary nature led us to acquire competences that diverged from our original fields of specialization. Thanks to the autonomy granted to us, we were able to build actionable projects from start to finish. We learnt project management skills, stepping away from traditional academic method.

Moreover, the collaborative approach on which the AltMob program was based, created a Start-up-like environment: this was a step into the professional world.

As we strove to achieve concrete solutions and bring together dozens of students from all around the world, this program showed us how interdependent we all are. Although many solutions responded to local problems, we witnessed how solutions from one side of the world can also be adapted and implemented on the other side of the planet. Similarly, time frames are also important, as some solutions require a long-term approach, whereas others provided a rapid response.

The wheel of solutions: 10 solutions to build back better.

Ten teams succeeded in identifying a societal gap which they wished to tackle. This led to the conceptualization of ten substantive projects that can be classified among three poles of action. These three poles form the center of our thematic wheel of solutions – a wheel being an important part of the bicycle we learned to ride during this extraordinary semester. Taken together, they allowed us to move forward and push back uncertainty.



A) Health & Environment

The first area of action to be identified is that of “Health & Environment” where three projects have been developed. Environmental problems are inscribed in a temporality of time also out of the Covid-19 pandemic and must therefore always be part of a solution-finding approach. Furthermore, isolation induced by confinement increased stress and anxiety of many people. Important links between health and the environment have already been established.

(1) GREENHEVA (Green.Healthy.Geneva): promoting the integration of green spaces in the city of Geneva for people's mental health.

(2) University Advocacy for Defense of Assisted Psychedelic Treatment (U.Adapt): claiming a shift in outlook on psychedelic drugs so that their medical benefits can be fully utilized for human health.

(3) International Student Community for Climate Justice (ISCCJ): raising awareness about people having experienced the impacts of climate change, in order to treat them humanely and decently.

B) Trust & information

The second pole “Trust & Information” comprises three projects. The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of trust in our institutions, as well as of disseminating and receiving reliable information in crisis management. These three projects aim to rebuild citizens' confidence in society – whether it is towards their democratic authorities for “More Transparency for Trust”, or towards the information that we constantly receive. Knowing how to identify reliable scientific or societal information is essential so that everyone can form their own opinions without undermining social cohesion.

(4) More Transparency for Trust (MTT): cultivating trust in our democratic governments.

(5) Clean News Project (CNP): sensitizing young people about fake news on social media.

(6) Global UpData Initiative (GUI): building a bridge between data science and global issues.

C) Solidarity and resilience structures

Finally, the "Solidarity & Resilience structures" pole brings together the projects of four teams. The Covid-19 crisis highlighted the lack of resilience in our societies at several levels: income security, lack of inclusive participation of citizens in crisis management, distress and a lack of civic engagement of youth, and a lack of social cohesion.

To continue to coexist and to resist crises such as this one, the bonds between members of society must be strengthened and regenerated. These four projects, with totally different structures and mechanisms, all aim to build more resilient societies and promote solidarity among their members.

(7) Citizen Consultative Network (CCN): gathering an online network to guarantee inclusive citizen participation in times of crisis.

(8) Glocal Income Community Project (GIC): coupling universal income with local currency.

(9) Voice on Income Insecurity (VII): tackling income insecurity.

(10) YUSCO (Youth and Urban Solidarity Community): connecting young people to their cities.

Conclusion

As outlined above, the Covid-19 outbreak has impacted the functioning of academic institutions, has led to a global increase in online education and drastically reshaped all our lives. Despite this “forced innovation”, the distance between each one of us and the closed borders, we have maintained the desire to use this crisis as an opportunity for change. **The Alternative Mobility attests to the aspiration of 40 young people to shape their future, and to be the agents of change, who will help to build back better, to create a more inclusive and greener post-Covid society.**

We wanted to move forward with solutions and not to be limited to their theoretical study. The program united students from all over the world, giving them opportunities to foster change.

We acknowledge that universities provide us with the theoretical manual on how to ride our bikes. However, that theoretical knowledge is very different from actually mounting and riding off.

The AltMob program enabled us to climb on the bike and gave us the space to try it out without fear of falling off or injury. The various modules that we followed over the semester perhaps helped us to find the pedals and discover how to turn the handlebars. In the end, it was our aspiration to be the makers of change for tomorrow, our endurance and innovative projects that got our wheel of solutions rolling. We rode out of our comfort zone, gathered speed and raced into the unknown.

AltMob is not simply an alternative program: it is a new and unique opportunity to grow and to create from scratch, at the interface between science and the active world.

It is a university program, though it is not intended for researchers, nor is it an entrepreneurial program. We have developed our own methods and solutions; we have addressed the complexities of the extra-university world, while using with academic tools.

Whereas the priority of government and civil society leaders has been to overcome the public health emergency and to produce rapid economic rescue packages, attention will now turn to stimulus measures to bring about beneficial change. Such change will not be limited to the health care sector, but will extend to the economy, the environment and society at large.

This declaration is a call for action to design **more inclusive local and global recovery plans, through which young people's voices will be heard, and their ambitions will take on tangible form.** We urgently need to scale up opportunities for youth with solution-oriented aspirations.

We shall not wait for the next crisis to strike to innovate.

With a vital role shaping the next generation of leaders and creators, universities – and especially the University of Geneva, should commit to institutionalize the Alternative mobility Program – space for youth to innovate. It shall not compete with or replace regular student mobility but should be a voluntary complementary part of our studies.

For more information about the individual projects:

1. <https://www.unige.ch/greenheva/greenheva/%20>
2. https://www.instagram.com/u.adapt_/?hl=fr
5. https://instagram.com/roadtocop26?utm_medium=copy_link
6. <https://www.instagram.com/cleannewsproject/>
7. <https://www.instagram.com/globalupdatainitiative/>
8. <https://citizen-consultative-network.mailchimpsites.com/>
9. <https://camroyer17.wixsite.com/gic-project>
10. <https://www.unige.ch/voiceonincomeinsecurity/vii/>
11. <https://www.yusco.org/>

Overlook of all Altmob projects:

<https://www.unige.ch/gsi/en/formations/alternative-mobility-crisis-as-opportunity-for-change/>

For further enquires:

Deliah KLAUSER, deliah.klauser@gmail.com, Tel. +41 79 327 37 71

Approved by the Altmob Community :

Eva LUVISOTTO - Deliah KLAUSER - Ottavia CABRINI - Audrey LONG - Yanis AMIRAT - Hanna DELLA CASA - Laetitia COLUCCI - Zora SCHONER - Cem SIRMEN - Claire MERILHOU - Clémence LANDRY - Lauréanne Y Chan LAM - Maksym KUTSENKO - Aurélien FABREGUE - Célia PERRET - Simon DUNNENBERG - Camille ROYER - Ander ZABALA GOMES - Bleona REXHA - Nada METWALY - Marcella PASTERNAK - Robin POLIAKOV - Rachel ATTINGER - Yasmine MOFTIZADEH - Laure BACCHIOCCHI - Daniel ROWSON - Gerard BRUGUERA - Camille DEAGOSTINI - Yovahn GUERY - Samuel COURTOIS - Estelle GRUAZ - Anja BETSCHART - Johanna HEINRICH - Guillaume BOUCHER-PROVOST - Tatiana GOUNDIAEVA - Greg RABIAN - Zoé NEWTON - Nina CARNAL