Coimbra Group High Level Webinar on Education Policy
"Challenges and future of internationalisation in the European Knowledge Area"
3-4 December 2020

Wrap-Up Summary

Whereas virtual exchange and digital education in general were already trendy topics prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the sanitary measures taken all over the world to combat the novel coronavirus have put the spotlight on the challenges and pitfalls linked to them. This has led to an urgent need for a collective reflection based on sharing of good practices and collaboration. The Coimbra Group High-level Policy Webinar explored the challenges posed by digital transformation and the role that higher education institutions can play towards this transition.

Challenges are wide-ranging, going from IT skills gap among university staff and students to assessment, data and inclusion issues. Up until now, digital education has been predominantly led by industry. In his keynote speech, Ben Williamson (University of Edinburgh), stated that the pandemic has created a catalytic opportunity for higher education institutions to change this trend. Industry actors are trying to compete with universities when it comes to the provision of online courses by giving students the false impression of immediate returns on their investments, the underlying assumption being that the purpose of a degree is to find employment. However, as Ben Williamson stressed, graduates' employability is not the sole purpose of higher education; universities contribute to the social, economic and cultural wealth of society and the training they provide is therefore all-encompassing.

The main challenges identified throughout the discussions with the webinar speakers included:

- **Proctoring:** besides raising students' anxiety, it entrenches the idea of individual examinations as the ultimate assessment method. Assessment is therefore one of the areas that needs further reflection.

- **Data-driven digital transformation**: the risks with industry actors as repositories of student performance data raises risks linked to reputational damage, legal action, breaches of ethics and rights. These challenges point towards the need for a sector-wide framework for **data ethics**.

- **Need to mobilise and support virtual exchange experts and build on the good work that has been done so far.** The spring lockdown and the current sanitary measures in place throughout Europe have resulted in additional pressure on the workload of university staff. Although there are virtual exchange experts in many institutions, at present it is very difficult for them to find the time to dedicate themselves fully to a structured reflection on digital transformation**.** In his keynote speech, Robert O'Dowd (University of Léon) highlighted that it is essential to **train teachers in running virtual exchange** and it is equally as important to support them through incentives. **Staff development activities** were mentioned by the ARQUS alliance as being essential for the introduction of pedagogical innovation.

- While digital education did certainly facilitate, during the lockdowns, the participation of people who would have normally not had the opportunity of taking part in specific activities, **inclusion remains a challenge**, more specifically when it comes to connectivity and equipment. As Sophia Eriksson-Waterschoot (DG EAC, European Commission) stressed: "We cannot have digital transformation without taking into consideration the inclusion aspect".

- Digital education and virtual exchange ought to also consider **learning as a social experience**, according to the Circle U. alliance. The lack of social interaction during the lockdown confirms that being on campus is not just about gaining academic knowledge - it contributes to shaping students' mindsets.

The pandemic has revealed how interdependent we all are. Collaborative work and networks will be key in the transition to digital transformation. In this sense, we are yet to exploit the **full potential of technology for facilitating collaborative work**. At institutional level, case studies presented by the universities of Pavia and Uppsala pointed to the importance of **involving all layers of university actors** (management, faculty, professional services and students) not only when it comes to emergency planning, but also in the reflection exercise on digital education. It is important to continue to ensure the dissemination of practices, both good and bad, so that we are aware of what is effective and what is not. In this sense, European University Alliances are good testbeds, said Una Europa alliance.

There is the danger of a tendency to resort to quick technical fixes rather than adopting a **long-term, holistic approach** to the challenges posed by the digital transformation we are currently experiencing. Indeed here we are being presented with an opportunity for a real change, rather than an adaptation to a temporary emergency situation (as was the case during the first lockdowns in spring 2020). There was general agreement on the fact that virtual cannot replace physical. As Dirk Van Damme (OECD) put it: "Contact with people from other countries relates positively to interest in learning about other countries". That said, instead of focusing on polarizing the virtual and physical, we should take the best of both worlds and reap on the benefits they can offer.

A Tradition of Innovation

Key Takings from the sessions

Session 1 – Reviews of challenges and opportunities

- The current COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity that has and will continue to accelerate developments that were already very well underway. **Digital education** and **virtual exchange** will grow and increase, in importance, scale and scope, but this needs to be done in a joint-up, integrated purpose mode and research-driven approach to them.
- Digital education and virtual exchanges will both be an important complement, but should not be an alternative, to in-person teaching or physical mobility.
- Challenges include:
  - o The threat that fully commercial online courses might replace degrees from universities in the eyes of employers,
  - o The risk that digital education, if not done properly, might entrench inferior learning experiences,
  - o Multiple privacy and security concerns around the ownership of data, proctoring, etc.
- Training, upskilling of staff, and resources are needed for both virtual exchange and digital education to do them properly.

Session 2 - Building concrete solutions via institutional innovations

- The Coimbra Group undertook in 2018/19 (pre-pandemic) an **internationalization** benchmarking survey for which the views of 17,000 students and 8,000 staff across 13 CG universities were solicited.
- The first results already alert us to important differences between expectation and experience on academic and social integration and the provision of global skills that prepare students for future employment. *These are areas that need to be properly assessed and incorporated in the design of the next Erasmus+ programme to ensure its long-term success.*
- With the pandemic, universities saw **mobility** numbers dramatically dropping and, at the same time, an increase in the service and support needed for prospective and current students and staff. They were forced to rethink, reorganize and restructure their support services almost overnight, which takes a lot of resources – both human and financial.
- Recommendations:
  - o Support HEIs to respond to the crisis and the new needs of mobile participants to ensure the rules and regulations for the so-called Erasmus+ 'Organisational Support' are generous and flexible.
  - o Ensure funding rules are flexible for new innovative initiatives within the Erasmus programme, for example to promote green Erasmus by digital initiatives.
  - o Ensure equal treatment of Erasmus students in crisis times: by ensuring the same rules and applies to Erasmus students regardless if they travel within or beyond Europe.
- While operating all their activities and services virtually due to the COVID-19 emergency, universities have to preserve the human dimension and the interaction that characterize

university/campus life in presence. **Career services** can act in this way by maintaining the dialogue with students (example: one-to-one career counseling) and with companies (customizing the proposals of placement tools and services).

- Recommendations:
  - o To be inclusive, career services have to move in the reverse direction of the market trends. They must plan transversal placements and career guidance services also for students of disciplinary areas that are affected by the COVID crisis.
  - o The crisis hits employers' capacity to plan recruitments. EU policy makers should support employment to avoid that "COVID generation graduates" become a "lost generation" on the labour market.
  - o Universities must continue to work for accountability and engagement of students' profiles in the labour market, for instance by developing micro credential and open badge process.

Session 3- Building concrete solutions via collaborative innovations

- European Universities Alliances benefited from a strengthened cooperation during the COVID crisis, which has accelerated their process of digitalisation. They are mutually offering each other courses, recorded lectures, training programmes, etc.
- Faculty, students and representatives of partner institutions (private and public) are gathering to solve concrete trans-disciplinary problems - challenge based attitude (be it a Knowledge Hub, micro think tanks etc.). A question that arises is how to recognize these activities.
- Alliance members marked an enormous progress in the digitalisation of education and partially of research. Participation at activities is very high, many venues are streamed and open to the public. Thus on one hand digitalisation contributes to inclusion. The dark side is social deprivation with all consequences.

Session 4 - Recommendations for the future of mobility and internationalisation in the European Knowledge Area

- Importance of knowledge: we repeat our call to national and European policymakers to urgently agree on the EU Multi-Financial Framework and to support Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ programmes with ambitious budgets (*update: the EU institutions reached on 10 December a political agreement on the EU budget 2021-2027 and recovery plan and on 11 December on the regulations for the Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ programmes*).
- Importance of cooperation and of a more global approach in the shaping of the future of internationalisation and European Knowledge Area.
- Importance of inclusion: students, staff and citizens.

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More information on this webinar:
https://www.coimbra-group.eu/policy-seminars/