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HOW CAN AN ASSOCIATION FACE CRITICAL CHANGE? THE EUCEN EXPERIENCE ACROSS THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is a test for our society - it is stretching our endurance and testing our strength. Big enterprises are losing millions. Small enterprises will resent this situation - a lot of them will have to close or engage in loans that will take years to repay. Many individuals will face unemployment - will everything get back to "normal" eventually? Perhaps not. Higher education institutions have moved into total virtual teaching and learning in a matter of days, without previous preparation. But, what happens with NGOs and associations that depend on their activities and rely on their members to continue their work?

eucen is an association with 170 members from 36 different countries, mainly from Europe. The budget of our association is based on EU-funded projects, membership fees, events and consulting. Resources are normally tight and the annual objectives and the long term ambitions are large. But, what happens when one or more of the four pillars (projects, annual fees, events, consulting) collapse? How can an association fight to survive in times of crisis? What is needed? Who is involved?

This paper explores how eucen has faced the current situation, the measures that are being taken and imagines briefly how things might be in the near future.

EUCEN'S ANNUAL ACTIVITIES

eucen[1] is a non-for-profit association that is financed mainly through membership subscription fees, EU-funded projects, consulting and the organisation of events, primarily conferences and seminars. The main objectives of the association do not include making a profit to share with shareholders, the annual budget of the association is tight and the eucen activities are offered to members and other users with affordable prices.

The planification of eucen's annual activities are based on a general calendar that includes a number of fixed face-to-face events throughout the year: in the spring there is an annual Policy meeting in Brussels, in early summer the annual conference and General Assembly and in autumn the university lifelong learning (ULLL) staff development seminars in Barcelona. For 2020 eucen had planned face-to-face events in April, May, June and November. Dates had been fixed (some of them over one year in advance), reservations for spaces were made, catering booked and eucen members as well as stakeholders had been informed and called to participate.

The overall financial impact of 2020 face-to-face events was estimated to be around 10% of the total annual net income expected for the year[2]. What happens when 10% of your budget is cut off from your financial arrangements unexpectedly?

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[1] www.eucen.eu link to eucen's website
[2] This estimate includes also events programmed for EU-funded projects in which eucen had a budget dedicated to organise activities that had been cancelled due to the COVID-19 situation

CHRONOLOGICAL ACTIONS TAKEN DURING THE FIRST WEEK AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ANNOUNCEMENT

But before entering into the consequences of unexpected cuts in tight budgets, let's see how the announcement of the pandemic was dealt with in **eucen** during the first seven days after the OMS' formal declaration.

Wednesday 11 March: - OMS announces officially the COVID-19 World Pandemic
- **eucen** schedules an emergency meeting for Friday 13 March

Thursday 12 March: a quick analysis of the situation including the possible financial impact of this situation is done and a number of possible scenarios for the 2020 calendar is prepared

Friday 13 March: - the Steering Committee of **eucen** meets virtually at 09:00CET and agrees which are the measures to be taken
- the Executive Director prepares a draft formal announcement and shares it with the Steering Committee

Monday 16 March: the auditor is informed that the date of the annual auditing will be maintained but the work will be done in virtual format

Tuesday 17 March: the draft formal announcement is confirmed by the Steering Committee

Wednesday 18 March: a final formal announcement is sent to **eucen** members and stakeholders and shared in the social media

Thus, in one week, all the planification for 2020 disappeared and, instead, a new set of actions were immediately implemented.

CHANGES ANNOUNCED OFFICIALLY AND CONSEQUENCES

All the 2020 face-to-face activities were, therefore, cancelled and transformed into virtual activities in a matter of days. The events that suffered changes are:

1. The **annual Policy Talks** in Brussels planned for 06 May 2020 was postponed to 09 September 2020. *This change required (a) informing participants, and (b) changing booking reservations of the spaces. Although there was still hope that this activity would be done face-to-face in September, participants were informed that, if it was not possible to travel, the activity would be still done 09 September but virtually.*

2. The **annual conference** planned for 27-29 May 2020 is postponed to 18-20 November 2020. *This change required (a) informing the hosts in Budapest (HU), the Central European University, and agreeing with them new terms and conditions (b) deciding how to deal with the registrations and the fees already received, (c) informing the keynote speakers of the situation, and (d) informing authors of abstracts attached to the Call for Contributions of this event. At that point it was expected that in November it would be possible to do this activity face-to-face.*

3. The **annual General Assembly** was maintained for 27-29 May 2020 but in online format. *This change required (a) finding a stable online environment to use, (b) designing a secure way to carry out a voting process, and (c) helping involved individuals to access and use the online environment (including members that would have to attend the meeting).*

4. The **annual Autumn Seminar** planned for 18-20 November 2020 had to be cancelled. Instead, the Steering Committee agreed to offer a free online seminar to **eucen** members on Thursday 28 May 2020. *This change required (a) designing a new activity, including finding topics and keynote speakers, (b) developing a website for the activity, and (c) choosing a stable online environment and learning to use it*.

The above planification was conceived in March 2020. However, in early June 2020 it became evident that it would not be possible to do the face-to-face conference in Budapest in November and, therefore, the Steering Committee together with the Executive Director of **eucen** designed a brand new activity to be offered throughout that month: the **eucen** ULLL Open Fora[3] that has replaced point 2 above.

NECESSARY FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS IMPLEMENTED

Economically speaking, **eucen** found itself in a budgetary year with an expected cut of around 10% connected to all the activities face-to-face programmed. Also, in order to show solidarity with professionals and organisations suffering the COVID-19 situation, **eucen** decided to offer its online activities in 2020 in an open and free format, which translated in no new income expected. These decisions needed adopting a number of financial measures, the most important ones are listed below:

- Review of expected costs for 2020 and budget – the annual budget was reviewed and adjusted according to the new reality. Some anticipated costs had disappeared whereas certain expected income was also gone. The reviewed 2020 budget shown a new set of needs and a new shape of **eucen**
- Cut of unnecessary costs – included in the annual budget revision a number of costs were cut, for example stationary. Some of the travel and subsistence costs allocated to Steering Committee meetings had been reduced too, unexpectedly
- Reduction of human resources – even so, the reduction in budget was not sufficient to face a "bad year" financially speaking and the human resources had to be reduced and adapted to the new reality
- EU-funded project days – affected also by the COVID-19 situation were all the projects that were active and funded by the EU. The fact that face-to-face activities could not take place (including meetings and multiplier events) had affected the structure of these projects. Some coordinators for example decided to extend the deadline of the project and, therefore, work that was expected to be done in 2020 have been moved to 2021. How this affects **eucen**'s budget? Our budget includes working days in projects, if we move working days for projects from 2020 to 2021 we have a gap of days in our 2020 budget. Thus, whereas possible, **eucen** has maintained its working days for 2020 in 2020.
- Extra days reported in EU-funded projects – working online and offering activities online is quite demanding and new for most of us. Whenever possible **eucen** has requested extra days in projects to cover this stretched effort that was not expected. In some cases we hope the EU will allow certain flexibility.

OPPORTUNITIES EMERGING FROM THE COVID-19 SITUATION

As so many other organisations, **eucen** quickly emerged from a moment of panic and put in place palliative measures for the situation, managing to find a number of unexpected opportunities that helped re-invented existing activities at different levels.

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[3] http://ulll-open-fora.eucen.eu eucen ULLL Open Fora 2020 website

a. Stakeholders and members level

Reinforced collaborations – COVID-19 has brought to **eucen** the possibility to create empowered alliances with associations like RECLA[4], UPCEA[5] and AAACE[6]. **eucen** was invited to present its case during the RECLA seminars online in April 2020 and, later on, actively involved UPCEA and AAACE in the **eucen** novel experience: the **eucen** Seminar Across the Atlantic[7] which was an opportunity to share knowledge and experiences between Europe and America.

New type of activities more inclusive and opened – Apart from the **eucen** Seminar Across the Atlantic, **eucen** has designed another novel activity: the **eucen** ULLL Open Fora, which intends to offer short events every day throughout November focusing in four different topics (one each week of the month). We hope that these two activities, that have emerged by chance, become a feature of **eucen** regular activities in future years as part of our vision to offer open actions that help our community, specially our members.

b. EU-funded projects level

Extensions for current EU Calls for Proposals – the sudden announcement of the pandemic also made the EU reconsider some fixed protocols. For example the deadlines for some of the ongoing Calls were extended and that gave an opportunity for **eucen** to join several more proposals. Whereas in the 2019 Calls **eucen** was engaged to participate in 12 proposals, by end of April 2020 **eucen** had joined 20 new proposals. There is no certainty of how successful these proposals will be, but the opportunity offered allowed organisations to prepare more proposals than usual.

Flexibility to timeline of current projects – the challenging situation also obliged the EU to reconsider fixed terms of on-going projects. Whereas the deliverables that were promised in the proposals continue being a committed engagement, certain flexibility on the deadlines and the way the deliverables are produced have been granted. The situation has also given the opportunity to be more creative and to find alternative ways of working.

c. Internal arrangements level

Digitalisation of the association – although **eucen** has become more and more digitalised in the last three years, the COVID-19 situation has pushed our association towards a greener and more virtual organisation than ever. For example, the standard three yearly Steering Committee meetings have become seven virtual meetings so far. Meetings are now shorter but occur more often. Also, having been forced to organise the annual General Assembly and the annual Audit in an online way has been a test for the association. This situation obliged us to prepare all our documentation in electronic format and to develop digital skills to accommodate the necessities of the moment faster and better than we would have expected.

Training online – the tele-working situation and the availability of multitude of free webinars have triggered the chance for **eucen** staff to participate in online activities that maybe would not have been considered in the past.

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[4] https://recla.org Red de Educación Continua de Latinoamérica y Europa
[5] https://upcea.edu University Professional and Continuing Education Association
[6] https://www.aaace.org American Association for Adult and Continuing Education
[7] http://seminar2020across-atlantic.eucen.eu eucen Seminar Across the Atlantic 2020

Communication – internal virtual communication has become more agile and fluid since everyone works from home. The use of chats such as Slack or WhatsApp, the launch of instant virtual meetings using e.g. GoToMeeting, Zoom or Teams has become 'normal' and has given us the flexibility to work and discuss things quickly and when needed.

CONCLUSIONS

eucen will survive 2020 and continue its trajectory, even though the situation has forced us to change many of the usual routines that were well established. We might have learnt the lesson to be more alert to what it is happening in the World, because sometimes unexpected events can affect us. And, specifically, we might need to build our annual programme with an open mind for flexibility, if needed. We have learnt that if you are forced to cancel, it is not the end of the World – things do happen beyond your control.

In conclusion, COVID-19 has been a challenge for everyone. But it has also brought significant opportunities for change and renovation. It has forced organisations to think outside the box, to share and communicate and to adapt to new situations from within and from outside of their communities.

The price that might have to be paid is some financial loss. However, this loss can also be taken as an investment that is allowing our organisations to quickly train staff and quickly re-design and renovate activities. To be taken out of the comfort zone and to confront new realities can also be an energising therapy.

A recommendation towards change: Always be positive!

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY'S EMPOWERED RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

Jenny GOOD, Brandman University, U.S.

Sasha CROWLEY, Brandman University, U.S.

> "*Change is never painful, only resistance to change is painful.*" - Buddha

POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH IN A PANDEMIC

The traumatic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was fast and furious in higher education. As institutions scrambled to transition from face to face to fully online, with students returning home (if they were fortunate enough to be able to) and campuses closing, uncertainty about the future, an urgent need to bridge the digital divide for under-served students, and financial decline seemed to be the only constants (DePietro, 2020). Suddenly, the resistance to online education was replaced with a "black swan" moment for distance learning as all instructors and students (from early education through higher education) ventured into "academic cyberspace" (Lederman, 2020).

While traditional institutions experienced significant challenges, nontraditional institutions, such as our institution Brandman University (a Chapman University system), were able to pivot quickly and move forward successfully with little to no down time. In fact, due to its infrastructure, technology, training resources, and mindset, Brandman University experienced a season of posttraumatic growth even with shelter in place, social distancing, and other mandated precautions. Psychologists define posttraumatic growth as a "positive psychological change experienced as a result of adversity and other challenges in order to rise to a higher level of functioning" (Lees, 2019). According to Tedeschi and Calhoun's inventory, the positive changes associated with posttraumatic growth can be measured in five areas:

- Appreciation of life
- Relationships with others
- New possibilities in life
- Personal strength
- Spiritual change

(Collier, 2016)

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY

To understand how Brandman University was able to thrive in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to understand its history as an institution. Brandman University is a private, nonprofit institution regionally accredited by the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC). Brandman University was originally established in 1861 by Chapman University to provide high-quality education at the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station. The mission of Brandman University is to provide students with a dynamic education based on excellence and flexibility that creates lasting value and relevance for evolving careers. Brandman offers undergraduate, graduate, credential and certificate programs across its five schools in the areas of arts and sciences, business, education, nursing and health (Brandman University, 2020).

About Brandman Students

The mission of Brandman University is to provide students with a dynamic education based on excellence and flexibility that creates lasting value and relevance for evolving careers. Through a variety of blended and online course offerings, Brandman serves a large and diverse student population, including active military and veterans and adult learners who are seeking a career transition.

- 90% of students work while completing program
- The average age of a Brandman student is 36
- 58% graduate with one or more dependents while attending classes

(Brandman University, 2020)

Brandman's IDEAL Model

Brandman's student centric philosophy is a driving force of the institution. As a result, because an overwhelming majority of our students are adult learners, we have adopted the IDEAL philosophy for instruction. IDEAL stands for Instructional Design for Engaged Adult Learners. This model positions the instructor as a guide or coach (instead of an authority figure) who creates a learning community that engages the learner in the "generative process of learning" (Brandman University, 2011). The three key characteristics of the IDEAL model are the following:

- Learning-centered rather than teacher-centered.
- Using technology to enhance and activate the learning experience.
- Combining synchronous (face-to-face or virtual) and asynchronous instructional opportunities with independent and collaborative online learning.

(Brandman University, 2011)

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: STUDENT IMPACT

The overall impact of COVID-19 has spread throughout all levels of the educational system. In particular, there has been a substantial impact on students. Students are now working to balance out multiple demands within their lives. These demands include working on their educational studies while also attending to the needs of their occupation and doing so with children and/or family members at home. Other students are ill or caring for individuals that are ill. In addition, there has been an overall increase in mental health concerns as a result of the added layers of stress within their lives. Some students have lost their jobs, permanently or temporarily, leaving students to work through additional financial concerns. With all of these difficulties, students are struggling to focus on their studies as they are navigating their new current reality, a reality which seems to shift from day to day.

The psychological impact can be quite diverse. Students may be struggling with a trauma-related reaction, sorting through grief and loss related concerns or working to manage levels of anxiety or depression. Or students may be swinging from one experience to the next, without gaining an accurate understanding of what is occurring in their internalized and externalized emotional reactions and responses. It is essential for those who are working with students to gain an understanding of these responses in order to accurately understand the experience of their students, and provide necessary support as needed.

Trauma

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; 5th ed. - *DSM-5)* created a new diagnostic category for trauma-related disorders upon the revision in 2013. This change shifted the focus upon the trauma-related event, and not the various

symptoms connected to these diagnoses (Jones & Cureton, n.d.). Included within this trauma-related disorders categorization system is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Acute Stress Disorder. The main criteria for diagnosis of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder include

1) Exposure to a traumatic event;
2) Intrusive symptoms;
3) Avoidance;
4) Negative Alterations in Mood/Cognition, and
5) Marked Alterations in Arousal and Reactivity

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

To receive a diagnosis of Acute Stress Disorder, there are several overlapping criteria as within PTSD; however, the duration and intensity of the symptoms is less. Mucci *et al.* (2020) suggest that there will be a long-term impact upon the overall well-being of individuals which could indicate an increase in these trauma-related disorders such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Acute Stress Disorder.

The trauma response will look differently in each individual. There are a few key components and considerations when considering the trauma reaction within students. As previously established there are multiple competing demands within the students' lives. The student is working to fulfill multiple roles and responsibilities, without refueling their "tank." All of these responsibilities will lead the student to override their own coping resources, while at the same time feeling the need to continue to appear competent and confident (Jones & Cureton, n.d.). This combination is the recipe for trauma.

Students may also be directly threatened by COVID, or there may be a direct threat within their family, friends, or other support networks. As a result, the student may be directly experiencing trauma or vicariously witnessing trauma. The media is also continually providing images, stories and information which could elicit a trauma response. Throughout each of these situations, students are isolated while experiencing their own internalized responses and that of those around them.

In addition, traumatic stress can lead to avoidance, emotional numbness and shame (Jones & Cureton, n.d.). In the classroom, students may start to disappear or appear unresponsive, uncaring or void of emotion. It may be challenging to take note of these reactions as a result of the remote experience of learning. Students may not recognize this shift or may not be able to label the change. However, these symptoms are some of the key defining features within a trauma-related response.

Grief / Loss

Grief is an individualized experience and one that may be triggered by a wide multitude of situations (O'Malley, 2017). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a tremendous wave of loss for every single individual. This type of loss is referred to as collective sorrow (Weir, 2020). Then, there are individual losses. Individual losses included illness, death, financial security, jobs, predictability, control, justice, health, future goals and so on. There is a component of communal grief as the world is watching a wide multitude of systems which have been seen as pillars of safety, support and stability (healthcare, education, economic systems) all become destabilized (Weir, 2020). As a result, individuals start to lose faith in systems and their overall understanding of the world. Additional concerns related to threats to our safety and difficulties with protecting our own are present as well.

The process of grief and loss goes beyond the physical to our own sense of self and our attachments that have been built into our lives. As humans we are attached to places, projects, possessions, professions and protections (Weir, 2020). It is this sense of attachment that can make the grieving process so incredibly difficult (O'Malley, 2017). Each attachment serves a unique need and component to the core being of each individual. When these losses are apparent or the attachments no longer seem to exist, a sense of safety and freedom is also missing. As a result, individuals may struggle with their own sense of self and identity. Major components of well-being and identity are missing, leaving most to feel lost.

All of these processes can become quite overwhelming. However, once again, everyone is experiencing these threats and these losses. The process of normalization is required to provide a framework of understanding. Grief is a natural experience with these changes and unknown elements (Weir, 2020).

Anxiety

Anxiety seems to be the core defining feature of most psychological journals. The *DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) has one section related to Anxiety Disorders. Anxiety disorders share "features of excessive fear and anxiety" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 189). Fear is referred to as the emotional response, reviewing the potential imminent threat which can include elements of hopelessness, helplessness and catastrophizing (Porcelli, 2020), whereas anxiety is focused on the anticipation of the future threat and tends to encapsulate most of the cognitive components of the situation.

Many individuals are experiencing both components of fear and anxiety when working to sort out their present experience. As a result of the ongoing changes within our world, there is not current understanding or clear time boundary that is present. Individuals are working to sort emotions related to an ongoing state of risk (IDMH, 2020). Within this ongoing state of risk, individuals are "staying braced" within this state of threat. This general hypervigilance can take a toll on our bodies and minds. There are general fears about the unknown, uncertainty in a time where there is a continual bombardment of information from media and news sources. All of these difficulties can lead to anxiety and potentially depression. Depression and anxiety tend to go hand in hand; however, it is important to recognize feelings of isolation, difficulties with finding purpose and/or motivation and the feeling of being overwhelmed.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: UNIVERSITY IMPACT

On March 19, 2020, as Governor Newsom issued the shelter in place order for California, Brandman took swift action. Although a majority of Brandman's classes are fully online, those that were running as blended offerings were moved to online. Brandman's 25+ campuses were closed and all staff began working fully remotely. With this quick and drastic change, there was an increased need for technology, an increased need for training (especially for instructors who had never taught fully online), and a need to provide alternative assignments and modify procedures for various programs.

While the changes were certainly impactful, Brandman was fortunate to possess the infrastructure, the technology, the training resources, and the mindset to support this sudden transition to 100% remote learning. Instead of letting the pandemic limit our performance, the Brandman team stepped up university-wide and took advantage of the opportunity to become better.

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY'S EMPOWERED RESPONSE

Consistent communication from leadership: From the onset of the pandemic, our Chancellor, Gary Brahm, hosted weekly 10-minute webinars to provide updates for the community about Brandman's response and to provide support. Additionally, daily "In the News" emails were distributed which synthesized important news related to the pandemic and the university's response. Town hall webinars were organized with the Chancellor, Provost, and faculty to address concerns.

Personalized the message: Brandman's student-centered philosophy was at the forefront during the onset of the pandemic. It was important to leadership, faculty, and staff to actively reach out to students and provide support and resources as needed. For example, Advisors and One Stop Specialists collaborated with marketing staff to create the video "To Our Hardworking Walmart Students: Brandman Thanks You!" to thank our students who work at Walmart and have been putting themselves at risk to serve their community (Brandman University, 2020). Additionally, the psychology curriculum team, among others, hosted town hall meetings to support students and discuss concerns.

Focused attention on the important things: To begin with, faculty sprang into action modifying assignments and requirements to accommodate the shelter in place order. For the teaching credential program, field assignments needed to be adjusted so that students could conduct virtual observations that aligned with the guidelines provided by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. For the psychology program, practicum placements and the required therapy hours were moved to telehealth. Brandman's Center for Instructional Innovation (CII) went above and beyond, working after hours and on the weekends to ensure that students and faculty had the training to attend and/or host meetings effectively in Zoom. The goal was to keep moving forward and ensure the best possible experience for students.

Take care of our own: While there were many advantages to having little to no down time during the transition, there was also a toll as many Brandman employees had to take on additional responsibilities with K-12 emergency distance learning, caring for sick family members, etc. As a result, faculty recognized the importance of taking care of each other and prioritized opportunities to do so. From mindfulness sessions to town hall meetings, faculty were encouraged to not neglect self-care. In addition, Human Resources initiated a "Well Traveled Program," which helped to promote physical activity and camaraderie university wide. Leadership even encouraged faculty and staff to make sure they were still using vacation time to stay healthy and sane.

Served our community: Service to our community (not just within Brandman) is an important priority for all of us at Brandman. As a result, Brandman began immediately creating content that would help meet the needs of our communities. Whether it was showcasing various free webinars Brandman faculty hosted related to coping with pandemic on social media, posting helpful articles to social media related to career development in the pandemic, or publishing resources to support K-12 emergency distance learning, Brandman sought to share our expertise and to support our community throughout the onset of the pandemic.

BRANDMAN STRONG

For higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a watershed moment. At Brandman, we leveraged the opportunity to grow stronger. Brandman Strong (Steinberg *et*

al, 2020) has become a mantra for faculty, and as we look to the future, we feel empowered as a community. Student satisfaction is as high as it has ever been, and even with the effects of the pandemic, enrollment has stayed steady. Innovation is brewing as we look to the future and brainstorm new approaches to ensure that, even in uncertain times, our students have the skills to thrive. Rather than resist, we have embraced the opportunity to change for the better. For Brandman, 2020 isn't cancelled. It's become "the most important year of them all" (Dwight, 2020).

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HOW TO DEAL WITH THE CRITICAL CONDITION IN THE PANDEMIC? UNIVERSITY LIFELONG LEARNING 4.0

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ABSTRACT

Given the current situation all over the world due to the COVID-19 outbreak, education as a system has been obliged to re-invent itself and to adapt to this unexpected situation. In a limited time, many issues pertaining to distance learning; online classes, assessment and evaluation; and equality in opportunity had to be re-evaluated and re-constructed. The universities have designed their courses online and provided online materials to enable the students, professors and instructors to proceed with minimum effect from this critical situation. The major challenges were students being unable to get the benefit of class interaction, which is one of the crucial features in learning; decisions on how to assess the learning in distance education; and some problems the students experienced with lack of opportunity to access facilities such as computers or internet connection at their home.

Boğaziçi University had also thought about these problems and developed its distance learning programme by first sending surveys to students to collect feedback from them. One of the major successes may be the new scholarship programme which was created for students who need support in terms of access to appropriate technological devices or who have connection problems in order to ensure equality of opportunity. Besides the restrictions of the pandemic, its impact on the psychology of students was also among the several essential concerns. Based on the results of the surveys, a programme was developed in order to minimize the psychological impact on the students.

In terms of Boğaziçi University Lifelong Learning, the main goals were to provide true, scientific and dependable information to society about the pandemic through online seminars, and to cover the educational needs of our students under those conditions. Keeping to the values and principles of the university, it was decided to change the settings and delivery of courses and projects to overcome the negative impacts. Ongoing classes and courses were evolved accordingly and transformed to online classes through the available platforms that were considered efficient in terms of online education and training. New programmes were designed to fit the current situation and to maintain participation in lifelong learning. All other work such as preparation for applications for new projects was carried out through online platforms. Transnational meetings and learning mobility were discussed among the partners and re-designed to operate online.

Fast and reasonable steps had to be taken in a very short time due to this unexpected crisis, and we learned that we need more flexible and agile systems in management and education.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 crisis has made it urgent and necessary for universities to innovate in many areas in order to be able to function in this crisis. The focus has turned to more online education and personal learning activities. Universities all around the world have taken precautions and actions to adapt themselves to this new situation.

The pandemic has caused massive change in the ecosystem of university education. As stated in a message from the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge regarding changes in terms of teaching, assessment, continuing education and tackling Covid-19, both the students and the academic staff of universities everywhere have undertaken great efforts in moving education online and adapting to new ways of learning (Toope, 2020).

In an overview from the American Council on Education, 53% of school presidents stated that it was "likely" that their organization would continue face to face classes for probably some segment of the fall term, while another 31% said that it was "to some degree likely" that they would continue face to face education (Smalley, 2020). One of the leading American universities, Harvard shared its guiding principles on reopening phases which depends on the status of the pandemic and the strategies to mitigate its impacts. Their plan for a phased reopening of on-campus activities is mainly guided by the two core principles of health and safety and continuation of education and research (Harvard University, 2020).

In Turkey initially the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and the Higher Education Council (HEC) worked closely together with the Ministry of Health (MoH) in order to determine the appropriate measures against the pandemic. Just a day after the first COVID-19 case in Turkey, a government spokesman announced that all primary and secondary schools and universities in Turkey would be closed. The MoNE delivered courses by means of its online platform (EBA - Educational Informatics Network) and the national TV station (TRT - Turkish Radio and Television Corporation). The MoNE has decided on EBA as the fundamental media for online instruction. EBA is an advanced instructive platform which was developed by MoNE in the academic year of 2011-2012. On this platform, different materials – including educational plan based recordings, archives, digital books, tests and exercises are available for education from preschool to secondary school level. It also supports the professional development of teachers by means of distance education (Özer, 2020). Universities have determined their online education tools mainly depending on the decisions of their senates.

Apart from the move to online education and the new technological supports needed, the psychological aspects of this situation both for instructors and students were also seen as important to tackle during the initial phase of adaptation. It is obvious that we have a lot to learn from this crisis in order to design and achieve the best solutions, and to implement a proper strategy and overcome the major concerns of the pandemic. With this in mind, surveys and data analysis are the first steps in allowing the institutions to analyse their capacity and to plan for the future.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF TURKISH HIGHER EDUCATION DURING THE PANDEMIC

Initially a few universities declared their intention to stop their in-campus activities, and then all the universities across the country followed suit and cancelled in-person classes and shifted to online education. According to the research by the Turkish Higher Education (HEC), 64% of universities in Turkey had started online education by 23 March 2020, which was the day after the one-week break; and in general, 90% of the courses in Spring Term of the universities were made available online (HEC, 2020). Implementation of the online theoretical and practical courses were 99% and 75%, respectively. The most intense use of online education was in Social Sciences (91%), then Physical Sciences (78%), Engineering (77%), and the lowest was intensity was in the Health Sciences (54%). The majority of universities preferred to use homework assignments (90%) and projects (83%) for the assessment of midterms, while 63% used online assessment.

Besides online delivery of courses, a set of supportive and informative activities were conducted in the universities both for the academic staff and the students. The majority of

the universities provided online training (80%), pedagogical support (77%) and technical support (60%) to their instructors, in addition to the online portals for announcements, guidelines and regulations. The students were kept informed continuously via email or SMS (96%), while online support units (83%), technical support documents (92%), online portals for announcements, guidelines and regulations (80%) were developed.

RESPONSE AND ADAPTATION OF BOGAZICI UNIVERSITY TO PANDEMIC

In response to COVID-19, after the first case in Turkey Bogazici University (BU) Senate and the BU Executive Council jointly decided to suspend all educational activities for two weeks by taking the spring break earlier. The BU Executive Council also voted to cancel all on-campus activities, all off-campus face-to-face activities organized by the University and all university-related travel until the end of April. The Boğaziçi University administration declared that the main priority was the health and security of the students, academic and administrative staff.

After two weeks of suspension, the education programmes of the university re-started as distance education on 6th April 2020. Distance education activities at the university were mainly carried out through the Moodle learning management system (LMS), which had been used before. Later on many asynchronous and synchronous courses were delivered by Zoom and Panopto through the Moodle Platform. In order to facilitate this transition, the instructors were supported not only with technical assistance, but through online webinars about distance education and its pedagogical aspects as well. Instead of online tests, most of the assessments were done as oral exams, take-home exams or assignments. In addition, an option was given to the students to decide if their assessment should be marked by letter grade or on a pass/fail basis in order to decrease the stress on the students during this difficult period.

A specific portal was developed for students in order to inform them about the distance education programme, campus activities, and recent pandemic updates. Boğaziçi University started a scholarship program to provide equipment and internet support for the students. Through the Boğaziçi University Foundation (BÜVAK) and the Scholarship Office the needs of the students were first assessed and determined. As a result, 367 students in April and 275 students in May were furnished with high-speed internet connections, and 172 computers/tablets were given to students.

Medico Social Center, which gives health services at the campus, also continued to provide online treatments and services especially with expert psychiatric support through online platforms for the students.

In terms of R&D Activities, Boğaziçi University was involved in vaccine development, biomedical studies, and new project applications related to the Covid-19 outbreak. Boğaziçi University has also been participating in clinical investigations and national-international phase works.

Besides education and research activities, Boğaziçi University continued social projects and continuing education through the Lifelong Learning Centre. Through digital platforms and online programs, Boğaziçi University effectively developed and provided information meetings, webinars and trainings. News bulletins were shared through different online channels, while community service practices such as open education and psychological support was also provided through digital platforms during this process.

BOGAZICI UNIVERSITY LIFELONG LEARNING CENTRE (BULLC)

Boğaziçi University Lifelong Learning Center (BULLC) is responsible for developing, directing and coordinating all lifelong learning activities apart from undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes at Boğaziçi University. BULLC functions in order to share the university's academic accumulation of over 155 years' experience of integrating the needs of society with the requirements of the era by presenting high value training. During its 18 years period of operation, BULLC has reached more than 100,000 participants through over 5,000 programmes.

During the period of chaos and uncertainty due to the pandemic, BULLC was also obliged to make changes in its educational activities. On March 18th, all face-to-face classes were stopped and the necessary measures were taken in order to maintain the health and safety of the BULLC staff. The next task was to work out how to transfer ongoing and planned training to the online environment. The most important impediment was that both individual participants and company employees were not ready for such a radical change. Additionally, BULLC was not totally ready either.

BULLC decided to develop its strategy by including all stakeholders' engaged in the process, with an emphasis on a strong and inclusive communication process as much as possible. Initial actions were taken not only considering the need to continue training just for educational purposes, but also as an important tool for engaging with people as part of their daily living in a restrictive lockdown situation. At BULLC, free webinars in different fields were organised in order to contribute to solidarity with society. Additionally, the open enrolment and custom programmes were conducted via online platforms to provide knowledge and skills to the participants. BULLC tried to keep as much interactivity as possible in the learning environment and to adapt to the online environment. Online certificate programmes on professional development, corporate sustainability, sustainable cities and climate crisis, and social entrepreneurship were among the new programmes developed. During this time, approximately 400 web-based training / other activities were undertaken.

Even in the extremely unexpected circumstances of the pandemic, it seems that BULLC adapted to the crisis quickly, took action within a short time, and continued its activities with the least possible disruption. This is mainly due to the experience gained from the previous crises, operational and administrative agility and adaptability gained through its operations around the world (i.e. in Senegal, Kuwait, Azerbaijan, Kosovo, USA).

RESULTS FROM THE ONLINE EDUCATION SURVEY IN BOGAZICI UNIVERSITY

In order to evaluate the efficiency of distance education in Boğaziçi University, a survey was conducted among the students and the instructors. The survey reached 2781 students in total, with 2527 undergraduate and 254 graduate students, besides the 352 respondents from the faculty.

Technological Aspects of Distance Education in BU

As it is shown in Figure 1, most of the graduate students and faculty members preferred using laptop computers only, but multiple devices were also used by more than 30% of faculty members and graduate students. Undergraduate students equally preferred laptops and multiple devices. Those using only smart phones, tablets or desktop computers were below 10 per cent for all three groups of respondents.
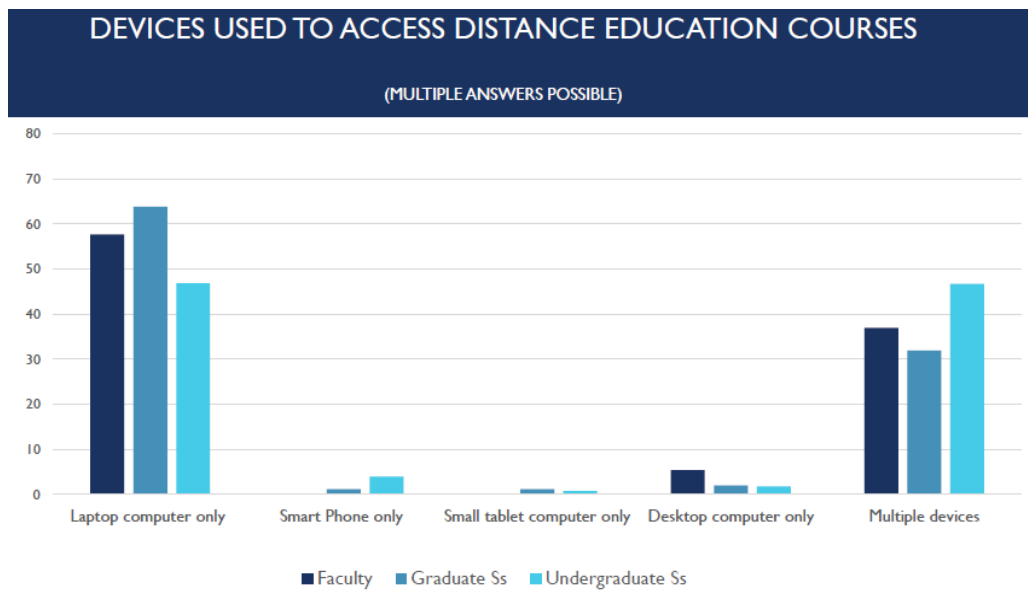
Figure 1. Type of Devices Used to Access Distance Education Courses

According to the responses in Figure 2, 70% of the graduate students and 50% of the undergraduate students stated that they had never experienced internet access problems during the distance education period. Nearly 60% of the faculty members had occasional access problems.
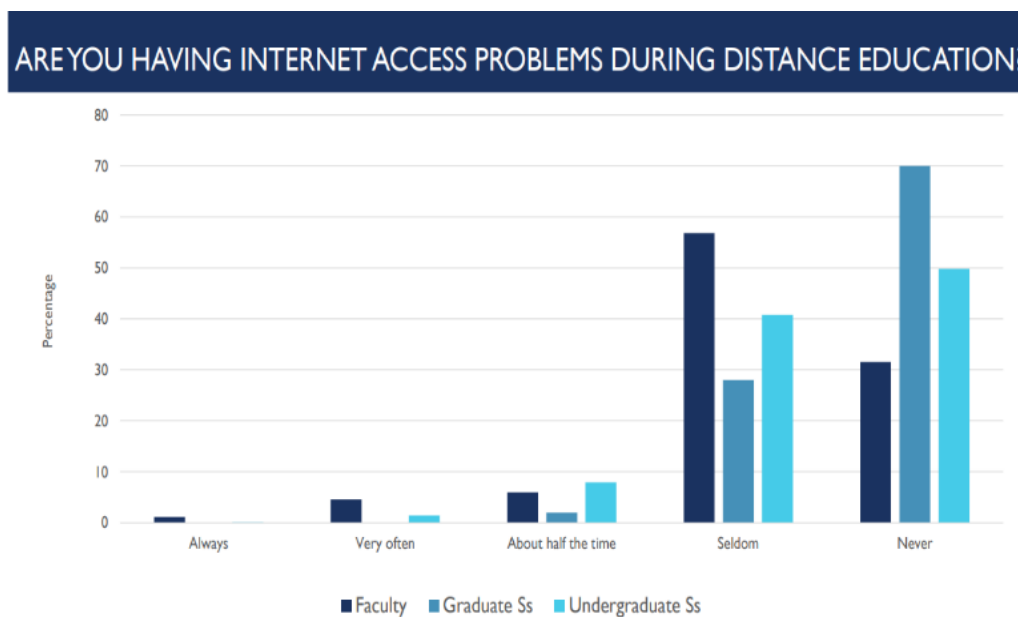
Figure 2. Internet Access Levels During Distance Education

According to the data given in Figure 3, most of the faculty members, graduate and undergraduate students stated that they were satisfied with the technical aspects of distance education at BU. The percentage of students that were not satisfied with the technical aspects of the distance education at BU was around 10%, while this ratio was almost 5% for faculty.
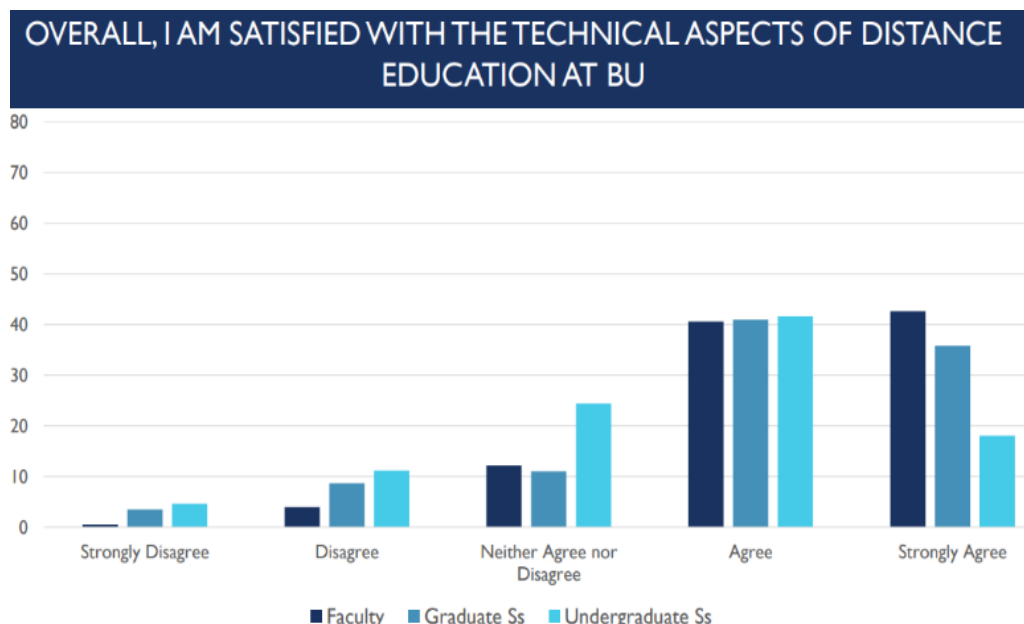
Figure 3. Satisfaction with the Technical Aspects of Distance Education at BU

Teaching and Learning Aspects of Distance Education in BU

In terms of teaching and learning experiences in face-to-face classrooms compared to online classrooms shown in Figure 4, most undergraduate students and faculty members found the experience different. The percentage of graduate students who found the experience in online classrooms different from actual classrooms is also high, but there are more respondents in this category who felt that that there was little significant difference.
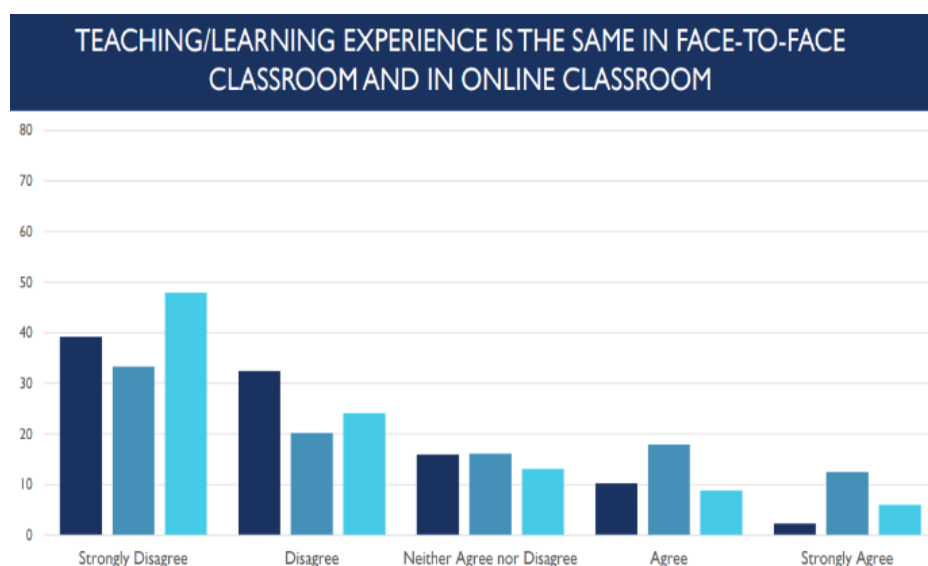
Figure 4. Comparison of Teaching & Learning Experiences in Face to Face and in Online Classroom

As shown in Figure 5, a large portion of students both graduate and undergraduate found it more difficult to stay focused during online lectures compared to in the classroom environment. The faculty members do not constitute a big percentage in a single response category, but at least there is not a strong agreement about difficulty in staying focused during online classes from the point of view of the faculty members.
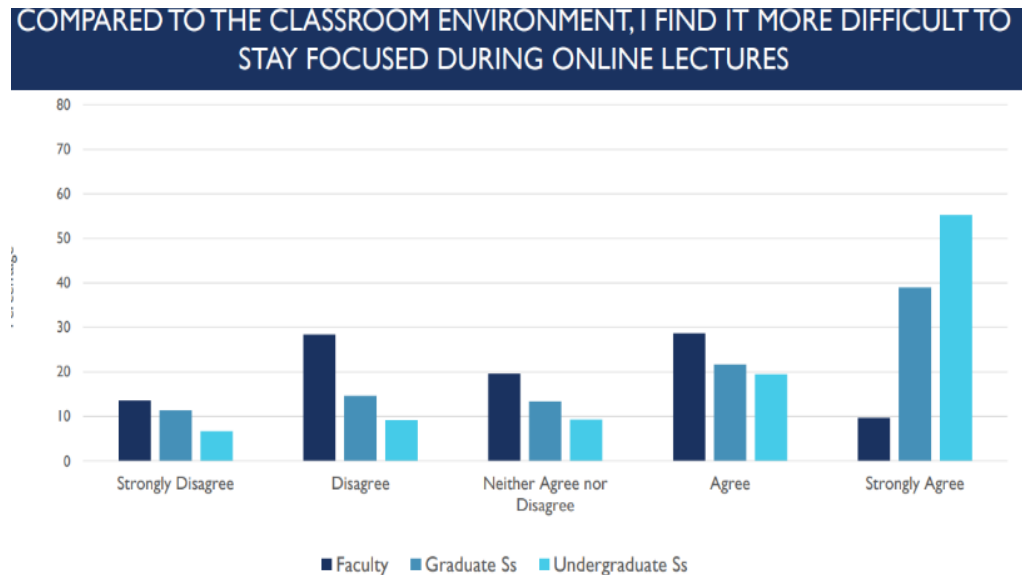
Figure 5. Difficulty in staying focused during online lectures compared to the classroom environment

Figure 6 separately shows that both the faculty and the students admitted that the effectiveness of distance education compared to traditional education was lower. Most of the undergraduate students stated that they were not learning at the same level in distance education. Graduate students were also more or less in the same position, but almost 38% of them found the learning the same for both methods. From the perspective of the faculty, more than 60% of the respondents did not agree that distance education could be as effective as on-campus education.
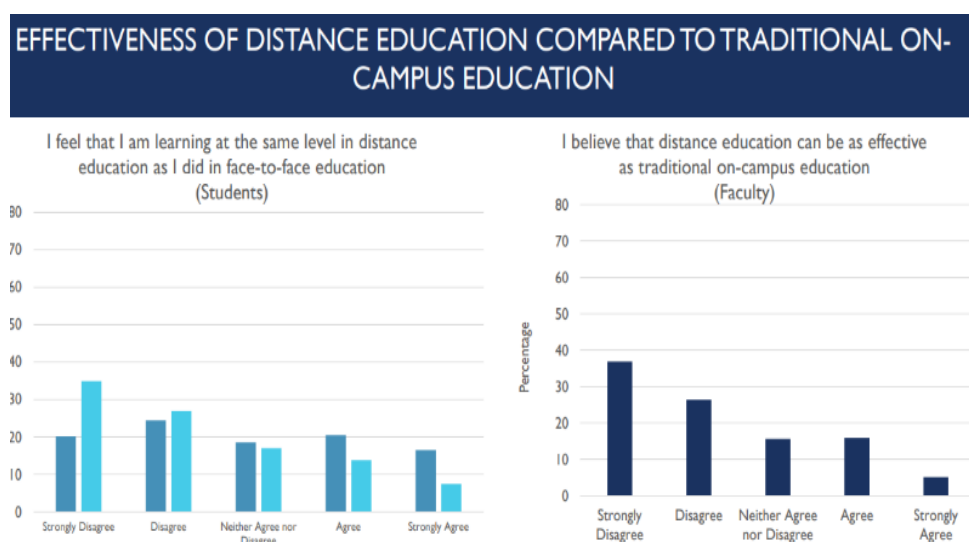
Figure 6. Effectiveness of distance education compared to the traditional on-campus education

Another major challenge of distance learning is assessment methodology. It is shown in Figure 7 that more than 75% of the instructors revised their evaluation criteria for their online courses considering the limitations of distance education. Only 10% of them pursued the same procedures in assessment.
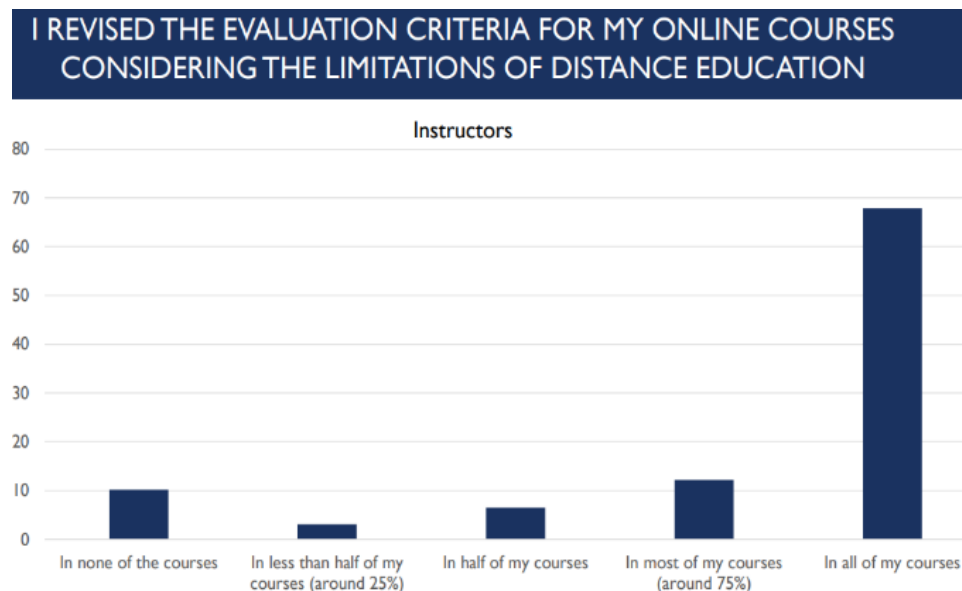
Figure 7. Evaluation criteria for the online courses

In terms of the workload of the students in the online courses, Figure 8 shows that a large portion of the graduate students agreed that their workload in all courses was realistic and roughly the same as the workload for in-class courses. However, undergraduate students mostly agreed that their workload in around 50% of the courses was realistic and the same with in-class courses.
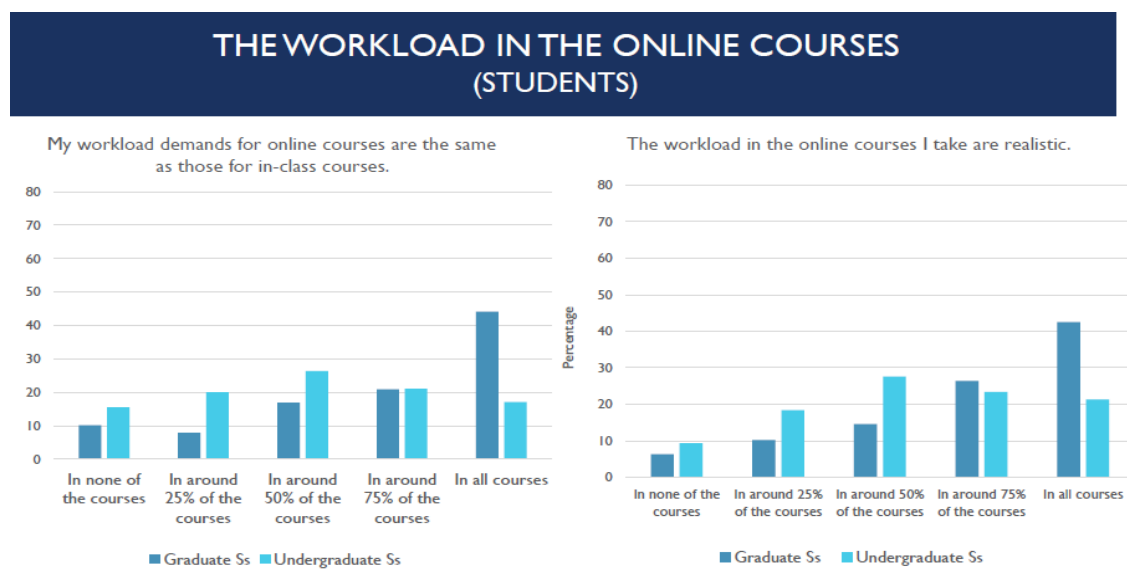
Figure 8. The workload in online courses

According to the survey, the majority of the graduate and undergraduate students were satisfied with the quality of the instructional design elements of online courses. However, about 20% of graduate students and around 25% of undergraduate students were not satisfied as shown in Figure 9.
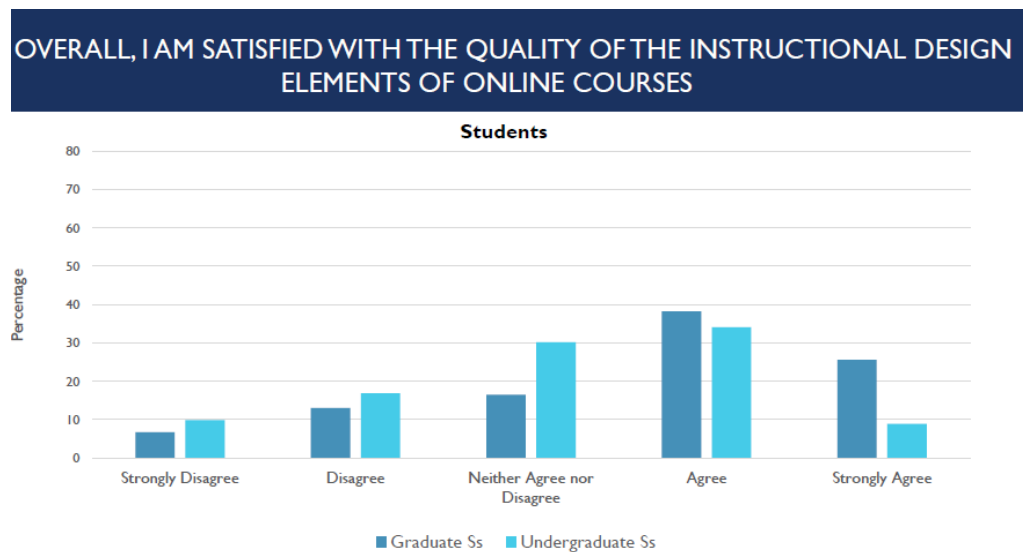
Figure 9. Satisfaction with the quality of the instructional design elements of online courses

It is a fact that the pandemic has been causing lots of challenges for education methodologies. One of the significant outcome of the survey is that the preference for entirely online education is very low. Figure 10 demonstrates that the majority of students and faculty prefer a mix of traditional and online classes, instead of entirely online mode. It is also noticeable that a significant proportion of respondents prefer an entirely traditional delivery mode.
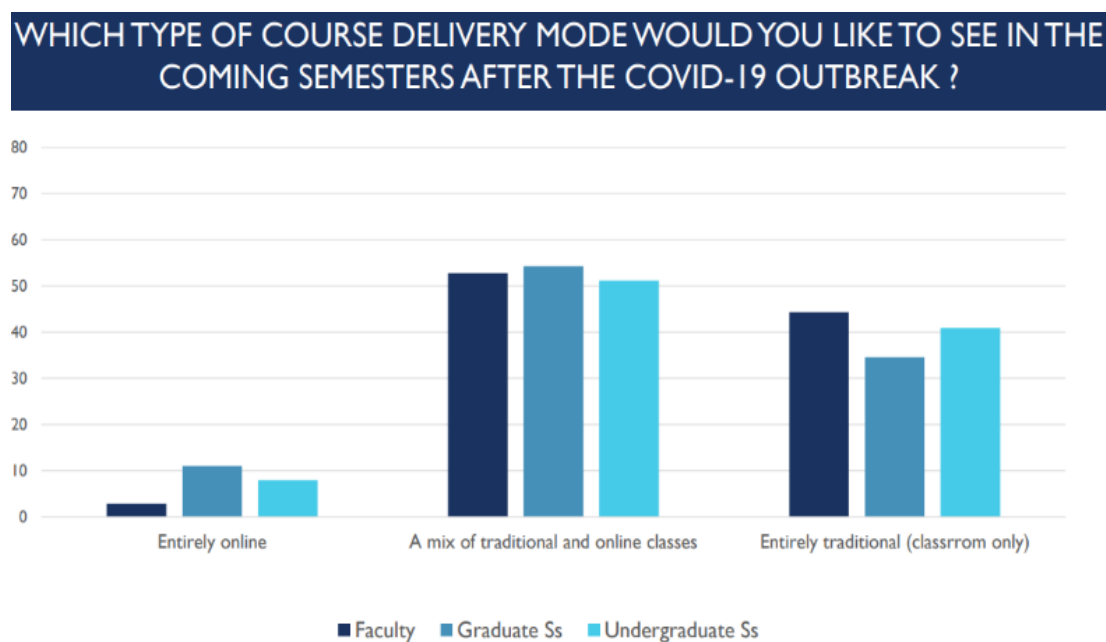
Figure 10. Course Delivery Method after the COVID-19 Outbreak

CONCLUSION

Covid-19 affected, and even put in crisis, all sectors including health and, later, education. The pandemic has been deeply affecting all layers of business and social life. Our usual behaviour patterns, habits, and ways of doing business that we knew and learnt have perhaps changed irreversibly. The main focus of higher education institutions is now on the fall semester of 2020-21, although significant uncertainty continues. However, this is a major opportunity to learn, and to pave the future of the education sector.

Besides the major negative impacts of the pandemic, one challenge of this process is the rapid transition to distance education and e-learning. Learning structures that offer classic one-way communication are being replaced by more interactive, flexible, and self-centred structures. Additionally, constraints (i.e. class size, physical distance, even language) have been removed with online education; processes have been accelerated and access to more people is possible. On the other hand, there are further steps in distance education needed such as capacity building both for learners and instructors; access to technological tools and devices; equality of opportunity in accessing learning resources and education; developing better ways of personal networking and communication.

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TRANSFORMING TO BLENDED LEARNING USING EXPERIENTIAL ONLINE FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

For colleges and universities across the world, a key response to the pandemic has been to shift learning to online environments. Unfortunately, given the nearly instantaneous requirement for change, many faculty had little preparation time to devote to develop effective online courses or create organized blended learning experiences (Brooks & Grajek, 2020). As did so many institutions across the world, the academic institution discussed in this article, Clarence Fitzroy Bryant College (CFBC), a comprehensive, educational organization serving residents of St. Kitts / Nevis and the West Indies, faced this complex situation. Because of Covid-19, CFBC faculty had to complete their courses during Spring 2020 using either blended, hybrid, or fully online approaches. While challenging, this forced transition did lead to some positive reflection and, in particular, an elevated appreciation by both CFBC faculty and administrators of the potential to effectively incorporate online components into multiple instructional settings, thus creating more enhanced and accessible learning opportunities in the region.

As part of their forward-looking approach, the leadership at CFBC recognized an opportunity to continue the momentum of providing faculty with suitable paths for enhanced development of their web-enhanced or online learning course opportunities. In this regard, CFBC is taking the initiative to provide a charter for significant ongoing support and professional development of faculty, not only due to the pandemic, but also to sustain and enhance learning for their students. This organizational challenge prompted a collaborative discussion between administrative faculty at CFBC and a faculty member of the Adult Education Program at Auburn University (AU), USA. These discussions led to the development of a common research project aimed at the creation of a broad-based faculty development program. This article outlines our approach to the creation of this program using an experiential learning framework and model by Kolb (1984) with the goal of increasing the development of faculty online skills. We describe our design and the specific steps we are using to implement the model, along with recommendations and assessment approaches to support a sustainable, blended learning curricula for the institution. In this article, blended learning includes the concept of hybrid learning, or a mix of face-to-face and online elements. Our hope is that the process can be replicated by other institutions and become a model for transition.

OBJECTIVES AND INITIAL APPROACH

The goal of this project is to establish a systematic, online, and effective faculty development program to support learning with technologies in both blended and online environments. Our initial activities involved multiple email communications between Dr. Moyia Roytham (MR), Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs at CFBC, and the authors. The emails outlined needs for CFBC in terms of sustaining faculty and learning in the immediate

timeframe due to the pandemic (March and April 2020). After the semester was completed in May, a videoconference meeting between MR, LAC and other key leaders of CFBC was held. During this meeting, the need for a two-part approach was identified for CFBC going forward. Part 1 was the need for a short-term suite of options that could be implemented for the coming semester, Fall 2020. Part 2 was outlined to focus on the long-term strategy of continuing faculty development and development of a centralized plan for online learning. For both parts, Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model (KELM) was selected as the guiding philosophy to ensure continuity throughout the programs, and to provide a lifelong learning focus for the organization. With this approach, we propose to develop a faculty development program that will focus on effective teaching strategies that engage students, and promote learning in both blended and online environments. KELM will guide training on effective instructional methods by utilizing simulated field experiences, reflection, and peer-to-peer learning. Using the KELM approach emphasizes critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork skills in learning. The goal is to equip faculty with the skills needed to fully engage students in the blended learning environment, and prepare students to enter the complex workforce of the 21st century.

METHODS

Short-term Strategy

For the Fall 2020 semester, CFBC's leadership are faced with both uncertainty about potential Covid-19 impacts and a compressed timeframe to create a training program for both faculty and students. Therefore, for the short-term, a decision was made to primarily focus on supporting and individually assisting faculty as they continue to transition their existing face-to-face offerings, with minimal organizational changes. Discussions about, and review of, multiple instructional technologies were held to determine how courses might best be enhanced with minimal impact on faculty preparation. Ultimately, driven by existing faculty experiences and availability, the Google Classroom® and Moodle® platforms were put forward as the most suitable technologies for immediate use, the primary reasons being that CFBC faculty are familiar with these tools, they require minimal support, and the resources are immediately available. Further discussions regarding the choice of an institutional-wide Learning Management System (LMS) are planned as part of the long-term strategy once broader faculty input can be obtained on technology preferences, experiences, and perceptions, along with cost and time considerations.

Long-term Strategy

Going forward, the plan is to identify and implement the core components that will allow successful deployment of blended courses throughout CFBC's curricula. A core requirement voiced by CFBC was that the final product must integrate administrative functions (enrollment, record keeping, grade transfer, etc.) with accessible instructional technology and effective faculty development under one scalable program. To meet these goals, a working group has been organized. Responsibilities being addressed by this team include creation of a Strategic Plan, selection of a LMS, coordination with the Office of Technology to deploy the LMS and merge backend management functions, and creation of training instruments for a faculty development program. These activities will be facilitated by on-campus meetings among CFBC participants, video conferencing, emails, and Google Shared Drive, using communication and interaction tools that are widely accessible.

Faculty Development Program

While creation of a cohesive online program for CFBC is the ultimate goal of this project, the remainder of this article will focus on steps being taken to meet the Faculty Development objective, which we assisted with during the pandemic closure of CFBC, and continue to assist with as part of the long-term strategy. This component best aligns with the expertise of the authors who are leading this portion of the project. As discussed in the Introduction, work toward this objective is being guided by the KELM concept (Figure 1).
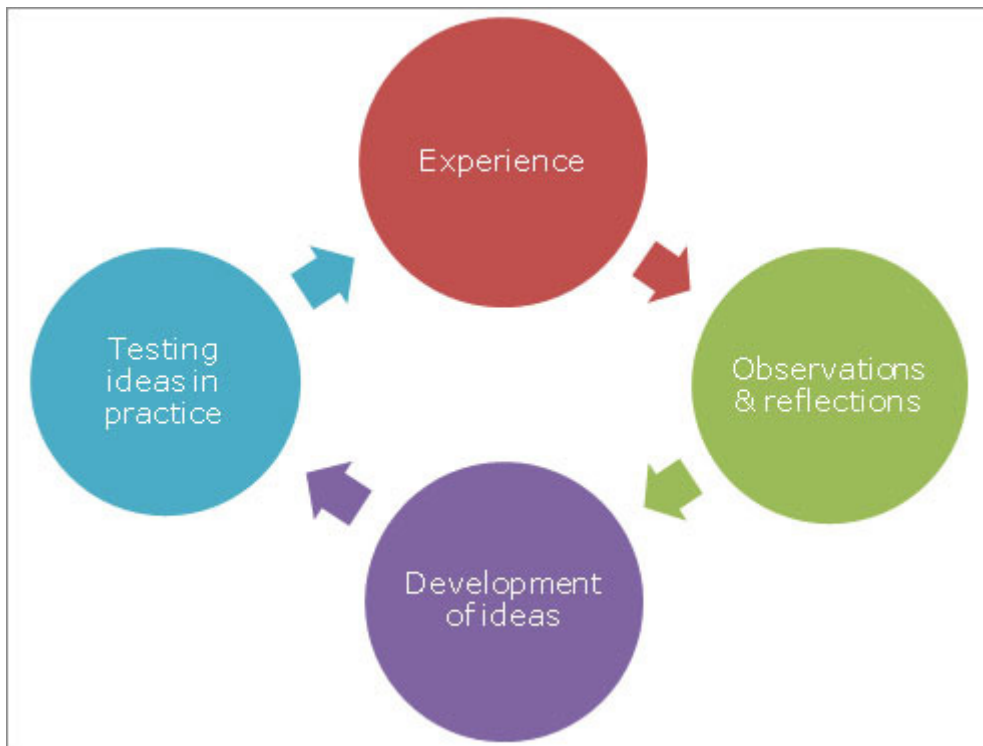
Figure 1: Illustrations of the key components of the KELM concept, based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Process (1984)

Central elements of KELM are that learning is continuous, experience is necessary for learning, learning is a dynamic process, and the role of the teacher is as a facilitator or guide (Kolb, 1984). The transition from a teacher-centered role, common in the face-to-face classroom, to a learner-centered online facilitator can be challenging for many faculty or instructors (Ko & Rossen, 2017). Therefore, guidance to assist this transition must be included in any faculty development program.

An essential step in initiating any new program is information gathering. To help establish a baseline for this project, a SWOT-based survey (de los Santos & Zanca, 2018) is being designed and will be distributed to all CFBC instructors. The purpose of this survey is to provide the team with a solid understanding of the existing attitudes, interest, and capabilities held by the faculty as a whole. Understandingly, introduction of any new instructional modality into an established system results in anxiety and pushback. Introduction of online components, in particular, tends to be a polarizing subject with opinions typically ranging from outright dismissal to enthusiastic early adapters (Ní Shé *et al.*, 2019). Informed insight into the intra-institutional situation is critical for establishing the

direction for faculty development. Interestingly, while seasoned faculty are at times the most reluctant to move away from the traditional face-to-face lecture format, they are often better prepared for the facilitator role than less experienced but enthusiastic colleagues (Martin *et al*., 2019). This dichotomy is likely the result of senior faculty often having faced instructional situations best served by alternate modalities, such as the Socratic method, reflective learning, and/or "active" learning.

A second use of the SWOT analysis will be to identify CFBC faculty already actively engaged in blended instruction. From this group we will work to identify users who will be willing to share their insights, both positive and cautionary, as part of the faculty development program. In our program, not only will these individuals be approached to offer input but they will also be asked to serve as peer mentors. Faculty with existing experience in the process can be critical to fostering acceptance of change among their peers (Martin *et al*., 2019). Our ultimate goal is to form a vibrant **Community of Practice (COP)** (Wenger, 1998) among faculty at CFBC to develop ongoing professional development and shared experiences across teaching and learning. Hopefully, these peer mentors will be encouraged to take the initial leadership roles in this COP and support the faculty and instructors across the college.

Our next step will be to solicit syllabi and course materials from interested faculty. These materials will allow the team to look for commonalities across instructional approaches, as well as provide an understanding of required content. This information will be used as a blueprint for the creation of templates for course syllabi and LMS components. We will be employing *backwards* design techniques, where one starts with the end or desired results and then builds the curriculum from that goal (Hughes *et al*., 2016). This approach will allow us to maximize a design that focuses on the learner. Use of pre-designed course templates helps standardize the students' experience and reduces the time needed to orient students to different courses. This can be particularly important in blended courses where student issues with technology can be a high demand element of faculty workloads (Ko & Rossen, 2017).

In designing courses for CFBC, we believe there are several major focal points that should be considered in the process. First, following KELM, *learner interactivity* is the central feature. Instructional elements that are being incorporated into the blended experience to support experiential learning include problem-solving exercises, case studies, group projects, online discussions, and project-based assignments. These activities will be designed to allow the students to draw from their own experiences while contributing to collaborative outcomes. Second, to prepare students for in-class portions of the course, links to subject related outside readings and online resources will be included in the LMS. A standard technique we employ is to assign two students as moderators for each week's online discussion. The students are permitted to choose from a list of topics from which they research articles, provide outlines, and lead discussion. These discussions can be synchronous or asynchronous. Both approaches can be effective with asynchronous discussions providing additional scheduling flexibility and time for students to research and think about their responses. Third, for higher level courses, the course outlines will include an Annotated Bibliography assignment. An additional online element that we will propose to faculty to include is the **ePortfolio**. ePortfolios provide a platform for students to display their academic training, practice reflective writing, demonstrate technology skills, and establish a professional identity outside of social media (Chen *et al*., 2012). Strong ePortfolios that include multi-course components can open career opportunities, especially in technical training curricula.

Achieving the above goals for the learner requires faculty cooperation, training, and preparation. Thus, a faculty development program with clear goals and readily deployable information is essential. Using online instructional videos, mini-lectures, and templated LMS examples, we hope to provide faculty with not only useful information but also direct practice with the technologies they will employ in their courses. Based on our collective decades of online course design experience, we hope to cover most of the major challenges faced by faculty leading blended courses. Topics will include maximizing student engagement, collaborative learning approaches and pitfalls, development of effective experiential and application based assignments, online test creation, setting assignment timelines, and user-friendly LMS design. Other areas that will be examined relate to assessment and faculty-student interaction. Anonymous peer review and assessment can be a valuable tool in terms of both training students to think critically and making effective use of faculty time (Wanner & Palmer, 2018). Online rubrics that permit peer grading are standard features of most LMS. Rubrics not only provide assessment but as importantly can serve as assignment guides.

Finally, suggestions for time management is an important part of any development program. When first exposed, many faculty discover that the online portion of a blended course can be significantly more time consuming than traditional lectures. Students interact with online materials 24/7 and often expect instructor responses to be instantaneous. In our program, we will be including suggestions on how to meet student expectations and provide timely guidance without over-burdening the instructor. Instructions on how to set up online calendars and technology for virtual instructor / student meetings will be available in our program. For multiple reasons, in blended courses, one or two students may monopolize the instructor's time. Meeting the needs of these students, dealing with procrastination, and issues of academic honesty are areas that require special attention in the online environment for any faculty or instructor (Ko & Rossen, 2017).

Teaching and Program Evaluation

CFBC has a solid record of accomplishment in terms of student course evaluations. In addition to using the standard course evaluations, we hope to incorporate a more robust Peer Review process for faculty that is formative in nature and supports the lifelong learning process for faculty members. It will also provide a vehicle for mentorship in academe and be part of the COP. As part of the program, we hope to have the faculty develop their own ePortfolios.

DISCUSSION

The core objective of any higher education institution should be to transition students from passive learners to life-long seekers of knowledge. To highlight the unique role of higher education in this process and to distinguish the process involved, we have previously coined the term **Chuoagogy** (Cordie & Wooten, 2018). The mission statement of CFBC, which includes - "*To foster the development of responsible self-sufficient citizens … and which prepare students to make lifelong contributions to their communities*" exemplifies this view. Ensuring that all instances where online components are employed in the CFBC curriculum faithfully serve to further these goals has been paramount in developing this project.

While the addition of blended elements to existing courses can be a complex undertaking, the rewards for the student learner and the faculty member can be many. When done correctly, traditional courses can be enhanced with online learner-centered experiences.

In-class times can be used to concentrate on problem areas and/or topics needing specialized presentation.

This project is being designed to ensure that CFBC faculty are fully prepared to meet the challenges of leading the implementation of additional blended offerings. Understanding that some teachers struggle with online approaches and that all faculty can benefit from access to instructional support, CFBC is taking positive steps to address these needs. By creating a COP for CFBC that involves both the home institutions and global connections, we hope to create a robust and sustainable model for faculty and professional development.

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LEARNING TO LIVE WITH IT: REFLECTIONS ON SURVIVING CRITICAL TIMES FROM IRISH ADULT EDUCATION

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An announcement was made by the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar TD on the morning of 12th March 2020 that educational institutions would close from 6pm that evening, to support efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19 (DES, 2020). As in other parts of the world, this was followed over the coming weeks by closure of most sectors of Irish society in "unprecedented actions to respond to an unprecedented emergency" (Doyle, 2020). These are indeed 'critical times' as the title states in more than one sense. Critical for population health in the short and medium term certainly, but also critical for us as adult educators in how we manage our being and doing as we transition from proximity to remoteness and distance. We hope this paper, based on student evaluations and tutor feedback, captures some of our shared experiences and reflections about living with uncertainty, learning in uncertainty and finding hope in emerging possibilities.

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH IT: THE IMMEDIATE RESPONSE

Although not unexpected, the sudden announcement sent shockwaves through the teaching profession as we shifted into crisis recovery mode. Home-based working, learning how to deliver classes online using different platforms and approaches of delivery was now imperative. In this instance, we were all working at home with the rest of our families – often several generations - combining personal, family, work and all aspects of living within the same space within the unprecedented context of an indefinite societal lockdown and unknowable global pandemic. In its immediacy, we were disorientated, gripped by a sense of fear which seemed to have no boundaries or limits, worried about being infected or infecting others, concerned about the health and wellbeing of those around us as well as our society as a whole. The taken-for-granted daily rituals and certainties of life were ripped asunder, with Hall describing how "concern about the welfare and well-being of my colleagues and students sit on top of a deeper set of anxieties about particular members of my family and friends, and buried beneath these are a deeper set of anxieties" (2020: 5).

Human nature being as it is, we tried to respond by attempting to balance some semblance of continuity and normalcy into our lives. Work was a major part of that ritual as schools and colleges attempted to continue to operate by shifting to online delivery in a "mirage of business-as-usual" (Hall, 2020: 2). This mirage became very real as we woke up the next morning and attempted to find a new work mode at home; the diffused new reality where work and courses continued to be run, no longer on campuses or in community centres however, but diffracted through online delivery in and out of home offices, sitting rooms, kitchens, attics and bedrooms across the country.

The immediate object for us all at this time was to find ways to enable learners to finish their programme and be as flexible and accommodating as possible in terms of changing planned assignments to take into account the general feeling of upset and disorientation that our learners felt.

> *The idea of finishing the course alone was very challenging. Many of the students were swamped enough already with new routines such as working at home, home-schooling at home and recent unemployment. They were struggling to adapt to "their new world". They were trying to finish assignments and keep their heads above water.*   (Adult Educator B)

We were also sensitive to the fact that learners and staff were dealing with real life situations directly impacted by the virus on a personal level (becoming full time carers for elderly parents; dealing with childcare and new home-schooling responsibilities; teenager and young adults returning home; supporting family members who were frontline workers in the emergency, health and community services). Many learners spoke about how changes in their work circumstances, family or home conditions meant they did not have time, space and mental energy for their learning as before.

In May 2020, we surveyed staff and learners in Continuing Education (CE) about their experiences of the courses before and after the move to remote teaching. Eight adult education staff and 68 learners responded. These are lifelong learning students engaging continuing education programmes in addiction studies, community development, creative writing, disability studies, psychology and train the trainers in different adult education centres nationally (all organised and certified by the Department of Adult and Community Education). Their responses were analysed and coded using thematic coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006) forming the basis of this paper.

LEARNING AS WE ARE DOING IT: ADULT EDUCATION ONLINE

In their responses, learners described the adult education ethos which had been created before the lockdown in the group-based dialogic processes.

> *I had a great experience with this course, before the lockdown it was the highlight of my week. It really became a safe space where we could talk about our ideas and our writing with no judgement.*   [CE student 2888]

In the immediate aftermath of the lockdown announcement, people were delighted that courses could continue online but were apprehensive about working in a new format. Many said that the online classes worked well because they were based on pre-existing relationships.

> *A lot of time went into helping us bond as a group and we all worked very well together. I feel I learned a lot … from my fellow students, and I enjoyed meeting everyone each week. The tutors created a very supportive and caring environment... The different teaching structures kept the classes interesting and I really enjoyed the learning process.*   [CE student 0593]

This was reiterated by adult educators who felt that the transition to online "was made easier *by the fact that we had well established relationships before the online course started."* [Adult Educator C]

However, tutors were acutely aware that they were intruding onto existing group processes which was challenging for learners and staff alike.

> *I did in a way feel that we were hijacking a group dynamic that had already been established. The class were using it [WhatsApp] for information as well as class banter which was fine … but I did feel that we had somewhat impinged on their "fun" group and I felt bad about that.* [Adult Educator D]

Building on existing group dynamics and social networks between learners was acknowledged as key by the UNESCO UIL Webinar, noting that response to COVID-19 "has been aided greatly by the civically engaged students who were well integrated into community-based programmes ahead of the crisis. Connections between students and communities were already strong" (Zaalouk in AONTAS, 2020a). Our learners emphasised the vital role of relationships with tutors and classmates which *"were deepened as there was an awareness of struggles for some during Covid-19 and patience given to include everyone in whatever capacity they could interact."* [CE student 4196]

Technical issues were a huge barrier for some learners, due to a feeling of not being "tech savvy", and for those who have limited wifi in Ireland and across Europe (EAEA, 2020). In response, tutors had to come up with supportive and creative solutions to deliver material synchronously and asynchronously through responsive use of intersecting online platforms, messages, emojis, follow-up telephone calls, ongoing support from peers and tutors, use of existing AV and web recordings and podcasts. Educators spoke of the learning curve they had in designing these responses and becoming familiar with technologies they had not used for teaching before in a way that honoured the adult education ethos of their pedagogy.

> *I offered students the opportunity to post up a word or words which expressed how they felt. Being able to articulate difficult feelings and see that others felt the same way – the font size of the word cloud grows the more people use the same word – seemed to help participants come into the right mindset to engage with online learning. Enabling free, anonymous expression which draws on current emotional states this online writing seemed to be, to use bell hooks' phrase (2009), a type of calling and stirring up. It was far more illuminating than had we conducted this exercise in a face-to-face environment.* [Adult Educator E]

The emotional and liminal spaces which the COVID context evoked is a key part of this particular experience of online learning. It was a shift made in the context of an unknown and unknowable global pandemic, with one learner describing how:

> *For me everything shut down, we were trying to keep in contact through Whatsapp and our own student email but I removed myself for fear of causing myself anxiety because of posts being put up about Covid19. I am someone who has suffered severe anxiety and could not allow myself too much around already without others posting up stuff.* [CE student 6969]

Learners spoke about *"not knowing about so much the abnormality to life, the trying to get new routines, worried life never the same [sic] was demotivating to say least. Missing the classroom. Missing people"*. [CE student 5121]

Many learners spoke about finding online communication challenging, as they felt "disconnected" finding the interaction style "stilted" or felt it was *"easier to hide in the background and not talk, it did take some effort to make myself try and involve myself in the discussions"* [CE student 2888]. Some spoke about how they *"felt very vulnerable allowing tutors and classmates into my home"* [CE student 6282]. They acknowledged that it is "*very difficult to develop inter-student relationships*" [CE student 7637] in online spaces. Many felt that the discursive nature of adult education pedagogy was difficult to maintain in online formats.

While many learners found it very challenging initially due to newness and unexpectedness of learning online, many did adapt to online learning, citing the importance of support from their classmates and tutors in this. Over two thirds of learners gave mixed to negative evaluation about learning online, acknowledging that online communication and learning does occur, but that *"face to face learning and live discussion makes it easier to digest ideas and keep in deep memory"* [CE student 1225]. The dialogic basis of adult education, its roots in learner experience and practice and its use of group processes means that the communications and relationships at the heart of adult education pedagogy are challenging to create and maintain in a virtual learning environment (Jarvis, 2010). Many students enrol *"to engage with practitioners, to exchange ideas, to network with like-minded people, both inside and outside of class times and to get to know people from their locality that they might not have known before".* (Adult Educator F)

Educators spoke of how they had to become learners themselves, feeling enormous pressure to rapidly upskill themselves about online pedagogy and platforms. The urgency required to affect this switch gives weight to Stitch's (2000) thesis in relation to accelerated learning underpinned by functional context. This pressure was self-imposed in terms of their commitment to their job, pedagogical craft and learners, but was also part of the expectation that higher education would maintain 'business-as-usual' and adjust to delivering the same programme objectives and content but in an online format (Hall, 2020). "*The transition forced me to become a learner – and a fast one! – in how I worked on-line and how I engaged in the tools that had been created to mimic real-class situations"* [Adult Educator E]. Tutors had to be adaptive, switching mid-cycle at a day's notice to a new mode of online learning: *"This was a serious learning curve for everyone. We were taking it week to week and hoping for the best"* [Adult Educator D]. For some, this experience of online delivery was "*the antithesis of what a university is all about"* [Adult Educator A].

Educators had to adjust their ways of engaging and communicating with learners in ways that suited the new learning environment and maintained the interactive modes of engagement which they valued:

> *Instead of reading the room – as I had been doing – I found myself reading chats, using hand up and thumbs up as ways to communicate – and recording each session so that those who had poor internet connections could download the videos and look at them in their own time.* [Adult Educator E]

In some cases, they described advantages for learners (and themselves) in terms of the benefits of commuting and being at home for evening sessions. Online provision did allow asynchronistic delivery which learners could access at any time and view at a pace and timing which suited them. Live online sessions "*allow for a degree of flexibility with regard to start and finish - e.g. if a student has to arrive late or leave early it is less disruptive"* [Adult Educator D]. For other learners, it enabled them to keep engaged, when they "*had unexpected surgery in February and was really only able to continue the course because it went online"* [Adult Educator, C].

Educators were highly innovative and caring in how they connected with learners, describing how they created spaces for check-ins, contacted all learners through phone and emails in the days immediately after lockdown, checking how people were, exploring what supports they needed, offered repeated feedback on accessing online material, reading assignment drafts and extended submission deadlines.

In other instances, they had to adapt what they could use due to limited wifi connectivity or technological knowledge to access online platforms and so worked through the existing technologies with which learners were familiar as also occurred across Europe (EAEA, 2020)

> *We came up with the idea of continuing with Moodle [online platform] but to add a lot more material to the slides than normal to give the students more information. This was coupled with sourcing relevant academic papers, documentaries and podcasts to strengthen the learning. A weekly discussion topic was also put on Moodle to allow students to engage with each other and the new material. Another tactic used was to join the class whatsapp group as this seemed to be the fastest and most direct route to getting information to the students* [Adult Educator B]

> *My broadband proved to be a challenge and after having to abandon a lecture one week due to poor quality I completed the course plugged directly into the main modem, meaning I spent 3 weeks broadcasting from my hall!* [Adult Educator C]

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH IT: PLANNING FOR AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

As this academic year draws to a close, we plan for the next with a very uncertain future in terms of the direction that the virus will take, what teaching will look like, what the economy will look like, and greater levels of precarity amongst learners and educators alike. Choices for Lifelong Learning and Adult Education will be made, and decisions taken regarding cost effectiveness and desired outcomes will accelerate change in the sector (Hall, 2020). The pandemic has provided a wider context for ongoing discussion about instrumental and social justice purposes of education.

There are practical issues too in relation to the need to develop to online ways of engagement into the future and to be able to flexibly switch between formats (given the potential of more lockdowns). Learners want to connect together and spoke of how their course of study *"provided some normality and a welcome relief at a frightening stressful time … to reconnect with each other"* [Adult Educator C]. As this research has revealed, this raises challenges for adult education whose pedagogy is typically based on group relationships, collaborations and dynamics. While this shifts online, it is challenging for learners and educators who miss the direct engagement and relational aspects of being together, the "*tea-breaks and chats*" representing *"the quality of discussions and group activities"* that are at the heart of adult education pedagogy. While adult educators and learners demonstrated enormous ingenuity in learning online, they also asked fundamental questions about the nature of learning.

> *How do we hold on to active participation and collaborative learning in the absence of group sessions? Information and discussion can be provided through ICT but the human interaction…will be difficult to achieve.* [Adult Educator B]

What the lockdown has given us is a break in continuity. It has given us the time to be innovate and creative. Disorientation has become a watchword. Change is the only constant and it was ever thus. Work / life change has been accelerated. But it has also given us the space to think about our lives in existentialist terms (Ryan, 2019). The difficulty in implementing alternatives is that the idea of them is too painful to contemplate, but there is always learning from the unknown:

> *There still is a bright future for adult education in the university now. It has called upon us to be creative with our teaching methods, and to embrace the unknown. For many students, it was a real saving grace to have the course to focus on and they embraced it ... Whilst it was a challenging situation for us all, there is a lot to be learned from it.* [Adult Educator D]

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RECONFIGURING A TEACHING & LEARNING CENTRE TO SUPPORT THE TRANSITION TO ONLINE TEACHING: INSIGHTS FROM THE IDEA CENTRE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MINHO

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ABSTRACT

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic required higher education institutions to rethink the delivery of education. The University of Minho in Portugal developed a rapid transition to online education. The IDEA Centre (Centre for the Innovation and Development of Teaching and Learning) had an important role in supporting teachers in this transition. This paper describes the centre's primary actions and presents evidence of their success in terms of reaching the teachers. Formerly the centre had focused predominantly on face-to-face teaching. Swiftly, the centre created initiatives supporting teaching and learning in the digital world. Initially, the centre developed social network channels (Facebook page and Twitter profiles). Shortly after, the centre started to deliver an electronic bulletin - IDEAdigital - for the dissemination of tools and strategies to assist online teaching. To foster dialogue, peer-support and sharing of experiences, the centre organized a weekly online informal event - "Sharing IDEiAs" – to promote discussions around teaching and learning online. Support for the use of active methodologies with digital technologies was delivered through flipped webinars, in addition to a one-time webinar on alternative assessments.

The use of social networks was quite successful, especially Facebook, with a high number of impressions, reach and engagement. The participants' evaluation of Sharing IDEiAs was positive, emphasizing relevance as a space for listening to colleagues and learning about methodologies and technologies. In terms of lessons learned, it became clear to the academic community and to the IDEA Centre that planning and training for the use of technologies in teaching is strategically necessary not only in the short-term, but also to consolidate hybrid education models in the future.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted all sectors, from economy to education. It was estimated by April 2020 that around 1,7 billion students had been affected by the closure of classroom activities in 192 countries (UNESCO, 2020), with possible effects on interpersonal relationships, evasion and increased social inequalities, in addition to the difficulties generated by the need to move to remote education, requiring greater autonomy and self-determination by teachers and students (Castaman & Rodrigues, 2020).

In Portugal, the pandemic situation started in mid-February. In the beginning of March, the first case was diagnosed in a student at the University of Minho. In this scenario, the role of the administration was to quickly assess the situation and propose measures to avoid further contagion, as well as to ensure the continuity and quality of educational activities through the so-called 'emergency remote education' (Moreira, Henriques & Barros, 2020), here referred to as online teaching. Confinement and closure of face-to-face activities took place on March 8, putting teachers and students in great expectation of what was to come.

The IDEA Centre – Centre for the Innovation and Development of Teaching and Learning https://idea.uminho.pt, which already had a strong role in teacher training and innovation since 2017, assumed a central role to support the transition to online teaching, together with GAE (Teaching Support Office) and the Dean of Student Affairs and Pedagogical Innovation. This transition should take place in the best possible way, since it always requires some degree of planning and experimentation, namely as regards the use of digital technologies that may not be part of the daily lives of teachers and students, thus implying the development of their digital skills. Although our institution has a platform that can be used for distance education, face-to-face education prevails. Therefore, having to move suddenly to online teaching was a huge challenge.

Online teaching requires a new understanding of teaching and learning processes, and how digital tools mediate them and impact communication and knowledge building (Farrel et al., 2019; Laurillard, 2012; Ní Shé et al., 2019). In our context, many concerns emerged in a few weeks, such as:

- How to respond to diverse disciplinary needs?
- How to choose the best digital tools for good quality learning?
- How to quantify the workload and avoid overload?
- How to motivate students and humanise online relationships?
- How to develop and stimulate collaborative learning?
- How to evaluate and guarantee equity and integrity?

These and other issues became part of the daily life of the academy, which, to a certain extent, caused insecurity and also uncertainty about the future. This situation reinforced the need for support measures, along with mechanisms that make online partnerships possible, both intra-institutionally (teachers-students-staff) and inter-institutionally.

IDEA CENTRE ACTIONS

Before the pandemic, the IDEA Centre worked mainly on training and project support activities, maintaining a website, a blog for communities of practice and communication by email.

The team quickly changed its way of working and new forms and channels of interaction took shape, with the creation of a Facebook page and Twitter profile, also used for the dissemination of online teaching practices and materials regarding the use of digital technologies. Social networks are increasingly attracting the interest of educational institutions, encouraging a break from traditional models of teaching and learning, driving changes in education and relationships (Manca, 2019).

Shortly after, the production of IDEAdigital bulletins began (1 to 3 pages documents), containing synthetic and direct tips, ideas and recommendations for teachers and students about online teaching and learning.

After three weeks of confinement, concerns and instability increased and the team felt the need to create an open and informal space for dialogue, focusing on the transition to online teaching. Partilhando IDEiAs/ Sharing IDEiAs (the Portuguese word 'ideias' stands for 'ideas') started as a weekly meeting (Wednesdays, 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.), allowing for joint reflection on issues and experiences, with a significant participation from teachers, but also students, other staff, and invited senior managers.

Three weeks after Sharing IDEiAs began and in order to enhance training, online training sessions were conducted using the flipped webinar model. Pre-session videos on various technologies and strategies were provided, followed by a meeting (Zoom) where details and examples of applications in real contexts were presented and discussed with participants.

In addition, a specific webinar on alternative assessment methodologies was held with the collaboration of Geraldine O'Neill (University College Dublin - UCD, Ireland).

Higher education institutions will most probably have to adopt a blended learning approach in the next academic year. The Centre's team, together with other teachers from UMinho and teachers and collaborators from the University of Aveiro, have prepared an online training programme on blended learning to take place in July 2020 (Docência+/ Teaching+), aiming at the development of teachers' digital competencies and the design of course plans for 2020/2021 in both institutions.

LOOKING AT THE ACTIONS

During the initiatives, some data was collected (from March 15 to June 25) so as to grasp the reach, engagement and perceptions of participants on their importance:

1. Facebook statistics: users, likes, views, impressions, reach and engagement;
2. Twitter statistics: tweets, impressions, engagement, profile visits, mentions, new followers;
3. Sharing IDEiAs: post-session evaluation survey;
4. Community: campus evaluation survey;
5. Dialogue with course coordinators.

As regards data from social networks, it is important to define the following concepts:

- Posts: Publication containing text and media;
- Tweets: Twitter publication, up to 280 characters, with text and media;
- Reaction: Indication of reaction feelings in posts, with icon;
- Impressions: Total frequency that posts appear on users' screens;
- Reach: Estimated users who saw the publications on the screen at least once;
- Engagement: Total estimated users who took action on posts (clicks, reactions, sharing, comments);
- Mentions: Indicates when a profile is mentioned by another on Twitter.

Facebook

The creation of the page was one of the strategies for reaching a wide audience and being able to disseminate materials (like IDEAdigital), Sharing IDEiAs meetings, training sessions (Flipped Webinars) and other actions, materials and events from third parties that could help teachers transition to online teaching. In just ten days there were 500 followers, later reaching 918 (25-06-20).The statistics presented in Table 1 refer to users in 25 countries:

Portugal (76.5%), Brazil (17.5%) and other countries (6%).

Month	Likes	Views	Engagement	Impressions	Reach
Mar	7525	1,232	1,140	11,675	5,748
Apr	20,685	610	944	13,241	7,633
May	24,036	769	1,263	16,026	9,381
Jun	21,565	342	499	6,940	4,868
Total	73,811	2,953	3,846	47,882	27,630
Monthly average	18,453	738	962	11,971	6,908
SD*	7,422	373	335	3,806	2,012

* Standard deviation

Table 1 - Summary of @Ideauminho page statistics on Facebook (15-Mar-20 to 25-June-20).

Likes on the IDEA page stood out (73,811), as well as impressions (47,882), with a high reach (27,630). A lower number of reach than impressions was expected, as the same user could have multiple impressions.
Engagement (3,846) must be evaluated together with impression and reach, as it is not enough to reach the user, it is important that he reacts in some way with the post to materialize the interaction. This does not imply that the post had no impact on those who only saw it on the screen (impression), but it was probably low.

Despite being a new page, it presents expressive and growing data, which indicates the importance of this channel for increasing the potential impact of other actions within the community during the pandemic.

It is worth noting that the posts with the highest reach and engagement were those related to IDEA group actions, that is, something involving the activities of IDEA Centre or the community, such as the post about planning Docência+, the online training programme under preparation in collaboration with the University of Aveiro. This post reached 1,646 users, 248 clicks and 87 reactions (335 engagements). There appears to be greater engagement when people see more use for it or, as in this case, see themselves as part of the post, adding affective value to the reactions and encouraging users to get involved.

Another highlight was in the post about one of the Sharing IDEiAs's meetings, motivated by the initiative "Skills 4 post-Covid - Skills for the future", addressing the challenges and opportunities for universities in the context of the resumption of teaching activities. Regarding this post, it is believed that there was great interest and anxiety by the academic community in knowing what would come in the new semester, generating a 1,216 reach, with 33 engagements.

Twitter

Together with Facebook, a Twitter profile was created as a strategy to expand communication channels. Although Twitter is not the most used channel in 2020, it still has many users, and the strategy was to adopt both channels to increase reach and engagement.

The growth of followers occurred more slowly, reaching 102 users (May 25), in addition to 325 followed users. The data from Twitter analytics (Table 2) indicate expressive number for a new profile (just a few months).

Month	Tweets	Impressions	Engagement	Profile visitors	Mentions	New followers
Mar	24	5072	164	325	13	29
Apr	37	7276	248	269	49	30
May	28	5931	257	136	27	15
Jun	25	5556	152	163	14	21
Sum	114	23835	821	893	103	95
Monthly average	29	5959	205	223	26	24
SD*	6	946	55	89	17	7

* Standard deviation

Table 2 - Summary of @Ideauminho profile statistics on Twitter (15-Mar-20 to 25-June-20).

From 114 posts, 23,835 impressions and 821 engagements were obtained, indicating that the strategy of using Twitter was important.

Similarly to Facebook, posts that updated people about news about an IDEA action, and with some indication for the future, had a greater impact on dissemination; in this case, the same Facebook post about planning the programme Docência+ was the Tweet with the most impressions (768).

IDEAdigital

Up to June 25, 20 bulletins (short informative texts) were produced and, despite the main focus being on teachers, several focused on a wider audience, including students and other academic professionals.

The bulletins covered: strategies for online teaching; online assessment; synthesis of some Sharing IDEiAs; digital resources; study management and online work; creation of digital materials, including adaptations for students with special education needs.

Bulletin 17 involved working with students through a partnership established with AAUM (Academic Student Association of UMinho), and from then on the editorial team includes a student so as to bring the students' visions and perceptions into materials production.

Sharing IDEiAs

Sharing IDEiAs was conceived as an informal, dialogic space, mostly directed at our community but open to all audiences (not just UMinho), aimed at fostering productive conversations based on the participants' concerns and experiences. For each week's session, a few guiding questions were sent to enrolled participants; in the session, after a brief introduction, the participants discussed the questions in breakout rooms with assigned moderators. The moderators' role was to mediate dialogue and take notes on main ideas which were then shared and discussed with the whole group.

There were 11 Zoom sessions of around 1:30 hours each, focusing on issues regarding online teaching, learning and assessment, with an average of 91 people per meeting, and a total of 998 participants in all, many of whom attended several sessions. At the end of the fourth session, a short survey was launched to monitor the usefulness of this initiative.

With 38 respondents, on a scale of 1 (not useful) to 5 (very useful), 53% indicated 5 and 39% indicated 4, that is, the sessions were helping people. But how? The vast majority mentioned that they had a space to listen to the ideas and experiences of others, in addition to being able to reflect on online teaching and learn about digital tools. The general perception, including the team's, was that the sessions developed a sense of not being alone and a realisation that many others were encountering the same problems, which may have soothed anxieties by increasing a sense of belonging to a community that shares concerns and seeks solutions collaboratively.

Flipped Webinars

This action focused on training for online teaching in the format of flipped webinars related to active methodologies and technologies with immediate applicability, organized with the collaboration of teachers who had explored them. Seven webinars took place: Audience Response System (ARS); Collaborative writing; Digital concept maps; Distance Team Based Learning; Padlet; PerusALL; Ted-Ed.

Teachers accessed a previous (short) video and participated in a synchronous session where the facilitators presented real examples and fostered collective reflection on how methodologies and technologies could be re-contextualized in other course units.

Global perceptions

To detrmine the teachers' perceptions on the usefulness of the various actions taken to support the transition to online teaching, a survey was launched in May 2020. Teachers from 10 faculties out of 11 answered the survey and 73 responses were obtained. The results, presented in Chart 1, refer only to respondents who indicated their participation in the actions.
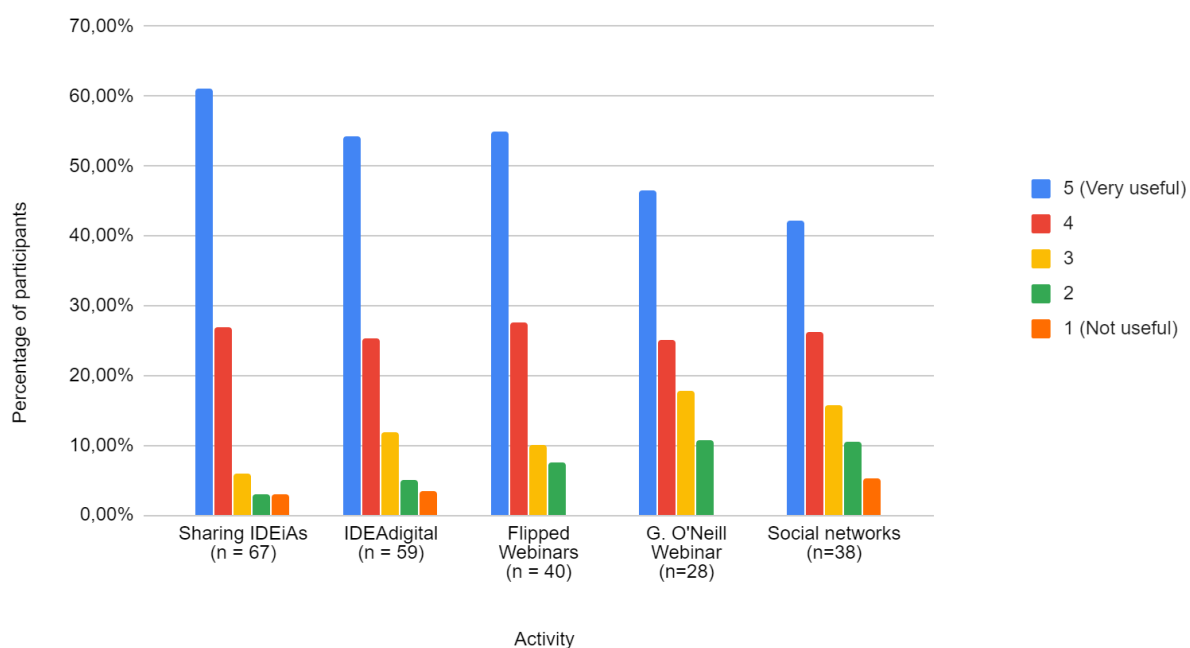

Chart 1 – Community's perceptions of the usefulness of actions for the transition to online teaching.

Overall, all actions were positively evaluated, mostly in the scale points 4 and 5, especially Sharing IDEiAs, IDEAdigital and Flipped Webinars, corroborating the teams' perceptions and the data on engagements and reach obtained from social networks.

The respondents' reasons focused primarily on socio-affective aspects related with the humanization of relationships, being able to listen to one another and feeling supported (Sharing IDEiAs), and also on the importance of materials and training sessions for developing competences on how to explore new educational tools and strategies in their teaching.

The course coordinators presented similar ideas, emphasizing that "We are remedying and if we want to face it in a more lasting way, we need to restructure, plan for b-learning".

CHALLENGES AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The reality will no longer be the same after this unsettling yet transformative experience. There have been innovations and professional learning, demanding great effort and resilience to advance new ways of organizing and carrying out teaching and learning, and of developing virtuous relationships as human beings.

The use of social networks expanded the possibilities of communication, providing digital tools for dialogue, interaction, interactivity and quick sharing. Dialogic spaces also proved to be vital for supporting teachers and students, accompanied by materials and training sessions to facilitate the transition to online teaching.

Efforts cannot stop and the key to maintaining quality education at the university depends on strategic planning and the community's engagement at all levels. This is the path that the IDEA Centre will continue to walk, reusing, recreating and transforming the actions carried out in this critical period, so that new forms of teacher development and educational innovation can flourish through the integration of digital technologies in student-centred methodologies, regardless of delivery modes and levels. A greater focus on students' perspectives and learning outcomes will be necessary to monitor change and improve practice on a continuous basis.

We learned that distance is irrelevant in the virtual world, and that intra/inter-institutional relations can create ties and projects that strengthen not only our university, but the academic community as a whole, because together we are capable of much more.

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GOING VIRTUAL: THE CASE OF CONTINUING EDUCATION - OPEN DOORS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GENEVA.

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INTRODUCTION

Re-inventing the way we communicate at the dawn of the COVID-19 crisis was the only way for continuing education programmes at the University of Geneva to keep some visibility during the peak of the recruitment period (March-May). It was also the only way to live up to a key dimension of our quality assurance system, namely informing future candidates and participants in a timely and accurate way of our course offering while answering their questions. When all the professionals around the world started working from home, and our teaching staff and programme managers got locked down, the need to reach out to our audience became crucial. At the end of February, public events started to be cancelled at the University of Geneva. We, at the Centre for Continuing and Distance Education, took the decision to transform our physical Open Doors scheduled on 31 March into a virtual event. We had three weeks. A real challenge: 350 programmes were counting on this event to recruit for the coming academic year and future candidates and participants, as well as HR and L&D officers, were counting on the event to finalize training decisions.

On March 31, visitors logged into a virtual platform and entered a virtual hall of the University of Geneva. Altogether, we built 3 different virtual spaces corresponding to those of the actual University Mall building: a main hall, an auditorium and a booth space. Moving from one space to the other, visitors could follow a 5-hour live programme with 12 video live sessions conducted by faculty and teaching staff and a keynote conference. People could also draw their ideal continuing education programme on a dedicated platform, get their LinkedIn profile analysed, or take a survey on how they were engaged at work before and during the lockdown. They were invited to get in touch with over 70 staff members who were "standing" behind 16 virtual booths organised by domain. Visitors could enter a Zoom room to have a conversation with them or just chat from their keyboard. On the booths, visitors could also watch videos, download flyers and drop their business card for further contact.

FIVE CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

As the world was about to shut down, we were still preparing for an "in-person" event. Several scenarios were envisioned: hold a much smaller event that could be attended by fewer people, live stream all the sessions or transfer the entire event online. We were then still thinking about sitting together with at least the teaching staff and programme managers. We imagined a kind of TV studio where all of us could gather, without any audience in the room. We had already done such live-streamed events in the past, it didn't seem so a big challenge to us.

Challenge #1 – Adapting to the ever more severe lockdown conditions

Day after day, the implications of an almost total lockdown became more obvious. At some point, it was not even imaginable to bring the teaching staff together in a room. And

soon, our team wasn't even allowed on campus anymore. Looking for a virtual platform that could host our event just like in real life became the only relevant option at some point. It required a lot of abstraction to imagine our visitors walking into the hall of the main building, trying to find their way through the booths, while having some fun and recreative activities to visit.

The experience had to be suitable not only for the public, but also for our staff: programme managers, professors, assistants, everyone had to be trained on the platform before the event. Their technical skills were very diverse. We also had to consider the language to be spoken on the platform: most of our staff and visitors are French-speaking. Because of the very short timeframe, we finally had to train all the programme staff to handle and set up their booth and run their live session in less than 3 days.

Challenge #2 – Keeping an emotional connection

The main challenge was not to find a virtual fair platform, there are plenty of companies that provide these kind of tools. It was to find the right people (reactive enough) to adapt a business-focused solution to an academic context, and of course to develop it in only 3 weeks. In addition to this, we needed to build a virtual space in which people could feel emotionally involved. We wanted visitors to feel as if they were on campus. A large part of our audience is local, and many continuing education participants have studied at the university years before. We wanted them to feel at home and to be entertained. We wanted them to remember that day.

"Transferring a physical space into a virtual space is hard if you don't have an emotional connection with it"

Bjorn Lustic, former computer engineering student, Blockeley University, CA

Challenge #3 – Communicating in a communication dead zone

Our first objective, as a public institution, was to show that we were still at our community's disposal despite troubled times, and able to apply our motto: *Professionals need to adapt to a changing world, explore it and embrace change*. This crisis has been a great opportunity to lead the way in that regard and to live up to our key message.

This key message of ours was indeed timely. But it still needed to be spread and heard. Usually, we start our Open doors communication campaign about two weeks ahead of the event. Which meant we needed to start it on … 17 March (!). Exactly the day the lockdown was pronounced in Switzerland and neighbouring France. We had printed flyers and prepared poster campaigns in our area. Those remained in the boxes.

The problem was not only *how* to communicate, considering that no one would put a single foot out of their home in the following two weeks, but even more *what* to communicate. The COVID-19 pandemic was catching all attention, in traditional media as much as on social media and all over the internet. But those media were our only remaining communication means. After talking with our media partners, we decided to re-focus completely our sessions and conference on the impact of the pandemic on the numerous sectors in which our audience was working. A winning bet: we gathered altogether no less than 600 people in the content-related sessions.

Challenge #4 – Focusing on quality content

"Who the hell do you think will want to attend a virtual event during those dark times?" - this was the kind of encouraging messages we received from some colleagues during the first phase of the project. Of course, they were right, no one would spend time just to

come to visit an exhibition hall, albeit a virtual one, enter a booth and ask questions on continuing education which they may not be able to attend. We needed to attract them with rich and engaging content.

Thanks to a highly talented and engaged group of faculty and teaching staff, we managed to propose no fewer than 14 different talks, all focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 on professionals from diverse fields.

We prepared a live stream, a continuous thread of activities that lasted for 5 hours. Faculty and teaching staff had to be trained to properly use Zoom and its features, as well as to deliver sessions online from home, with a professional setting (light, background, sound, etc.). During the first four hours, people could choose between two different programmes broadcasted simultaneously. The last hour of the event was devoted to a keynote conference hosting a panel discussion amongst three experts, broadcast live on Youtube in addition to our virtual platform. Competencies such as cast direction, production, journalism and technical skills in live streaming have been crucial to succeed.

Challenge #5 – Getting visitors on the virtual campus!

Despite the lockdown, the fear of COVID, the monopolized media and the general distraction, over 1,000 people attended the event (the previous face-to-face event gathered about 400 people). Throughout this five-hour live event, the sessions reached a peak attendance of about 200 participants, and the final live conference about 250. Our virtual event was the first of its kind in an academic context in Switzerland. Therefore, it caught a lot of attention from the media and the local networks who promoted it massively. Shifting the focus of the academic talks onto dealing with the COVID pandemic helped a lot to gain attention, but also the look-and-feel of a first virtual experience tempted visitors. Visitors admitted in a survey that the entertaining format had attracted them as much as the topics covered.

According to that same survey which we conducted, both the audience and the staff involved expressed their wish to see such an online event take place again next year, in parallel to a face-to-face event, even if sanitary conditions would allow us to all meet without restrictions.

5 LESSONS TO REMEMBER

This original and innovative experience was, of course, full of lessons to be learned. Here we share some of the main lessons learnt:

Lesson #1 The programme must fit the audience's needs

The most important lesson learned is that the virtual format of the event is a necessary but not a sufficient feature to attract participants. Without a programme that fits the actual needs of our audience, it would have been very hard to engage with media and people, especially in a crisis context.

Assessing our target audiences' needs was hardly less difficult than moving to a virtual format! We reached out to key stakeholders, members of strategic board and alumni networks to explore expectations. We chose to answer some immediate questions related to the COVID situation, while at the same time tackling the broader challenges facing professionals today, namely digitalization and the pressure to re-skill or up-skill. Harnessing the power of systematic analysis and critical thinking to the immediate situation provided a strong red line for the entire event.

Lesson #2 Human beings are hard to see on a virtual platform

Another important lesson is that on a virtual platform, human beings are hard to see, even if they are available and connected. Most of the interactions happened in the session rooms where indeed seeing the number of participants increasing was a source of enthusiasm both for speakers and participants. But beside these sessions, a small number of live interactions took place between the public and the course managers waiting in the booths. It was very difficult to figure out how many people were visiting simultaneously. As there was no count display (except in the Zoom rooms), visitors didn't know if they were alone on campus or with 1,000 other people. UNIGE staff didn't know either how many people were visiting their booth, and they were altogether surprised to see the big figures after the event, as they didn't get a lot of chat / zoom interactions during the afternoon. Numerous people just downloaded brochures, watched videos or read information. This situation created some frustrations among the staff. The platform builder has now enhanced visibility of "real" people available on the booths. In comparison to a regular exhibition hall, the thing we missed most that day was finally the murmur of the crowd!

Lesson #3 Drill the speakers and booth staff

Quality content can be lost through a poor presentation or ignorance of certain rules concerning the use of digital technology. How to behave in front of the camera, how to address the audience - even if you only see your computer in front of you, how to encourage participants to ask questions, how to practice using a survey or sharing a document, which rules of conduct (netiquette) are fundamental to avoid slippage. Those were amongst the crucial issues to be addressed before the event. It was not new to our Centre but this time, speakers and staff had to be trained and had to learn fast! These issues were all the more crucial since each speaker spoke from home, sometimes from their bedroom. Remote support was available during the event but some precious minutes could be lost together with the audience's attention.

Lesson #4 You can never be too careful

"You can never be too careful", this is another important lesson learnt. Set up back-ups and back-up of back-ups, rehearse, organise dress rehearsals and prepare Plan Bs have prevented our event from failing dramatically, especially in the live parts of the event. At first, we wondered if all these "emergency procedures" weren't a bit of paranoia. In the end, none of them proved useless and we saved our live-streamed keynote conference with a plan B that was activated in less than 5 minutes. Staff and contractors with sound technical skills and almost unlimited dedication proved to be a must to run such a live virtual event.

Lesson #5 A virtual setting won't make the buzz by itself anymore

This is a lesson learnt directed to the future. We were lucky enough to be the first university in the country and probably on a larger scale to organize a virtual Open Door event in an academic context. Now it's over. And the company who built the platform has received no less than 500 requests from clients with similar needs to ours in the past three months, including a range of universities. Soon, it won't be a novelty anymore to hold a virtual event, and we will need to reinvent the use we made of this platform to host our next virtual events. Focusing on humans behind the machine will probably be our focus. We will have to be creative again. The sky is the limit.

PAVING THE WAY FOR A VIRTUAL FUTURE AT UNIVERSITY OF GENEVA

Since 31 March, our team has received over 15 requests from other departments at the university or directly from other universities in Europe to share our experience, with the ambition to replicate it for their own events. An interdepartmental group has since then been created to reflect on virtual events at the university level and to guide staff in making the right decisions when turning a face-to-face event into a virtual event. The aim is to think beyond the immediate crisis and leverage the experience to live up to a variety of objectives, including some sustainable development objectives the university has set itself to reach by 2030.

Our Centre for Continuing and Distance Education is now planning to make the virtual platform a key component of our communication strategic tools. Our objective: reaching out to our audiences, wherever they may be, while offering the emotional look-and-feel of being on campus in Geneva.

CONCLUSION

Virtual worlds are swarming these days. Even well before March 2020, universities have used virtual worlds to promote their curriculums or campuses. In California, some universities are using virtual platforms on a daily basis to deliver continuing education courses, Stanford University for example is using Virbela. However, the technical requirements at the user's level are a major limitation to a wide and efficient use of these kind of virtual reality spaces. Other universities have experimented with *ad hoc* solutions, such as the Blockeley student-run initiative of a Minecraft world to host a graduation ceremony. Our ambition this spring though was not to impress visitors with visuals or to replicate video games environments, but instead to put forward the excellence and relevance of our faculty research and teaching in a simple but emotional way. We are proud to have met our objective in that regard.

Will virtual campuses and events really become so crucial for continuing education in the future? Yes, we do believe so, because lifelong learning is where experience and innovation can meet. If we are adding to the recipe flexibility and connectedness, the setting will enable professionals to successfully invent tomorrow's world. However, we shouldn't forget that learning is facilitated by emotions and the latter are better experienced in person. Also, professional networks are most often built on the basis of informal face-to-face meetings. Hybrid formats have therefore never been so attractive, and it is the path we have chosen to follow for the coming years.

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RETHINKING EDUCATION AFTER COVID-19. AN EXPERIENCE OF ONLINE LABORATORY AND PRACTICUM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CATANIA

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COVID-19: IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

Since March 2020 national quarantine measures forced all the universities to move their lessons online. The reaction of the University of Catania, like all Italian universities, in responding to the emergency of COVID-19 was immediate. The goal, declared by the Minister of Universities and Research, Prof. Gaetano Manfredi, is that no student should miss classes and examinations. Within a week in the University of Catania learning continues through distance and notably digital solutions.

The departments are immediately closed to faculty and technical-administrative staff; PhD students and postdoctoral students cannot gain access to continue their research activities; entrance to laboratories is forbidden to thesis students. Students and undergraduates can meet their teachers or tutors only through the online platform; departmental and degree course meetings and assemblies can be called only in "remote" mode. All the libraries are closed to the public; sports facilities and the university canteen are shut down. The University decides to cease providing the services offered for disabled students. Curricular and extracurricular internships as well as post-degree traineeships at regional, national and international level are suspended. Only online internships or practicums and laboratories are possible. However, because it is difficult to replace hands-on experience with distance activities, the University of Catania decides to reduce the number of hours devoted to internships, practicums and laboratories and leaves degree course leaders to organize autonomously, agreeing on substitute activities with the academic tutors and the workplace mentors.

The plan for "distance learning" for the University of Catania, rapidly set out during March 2020 to ensure that the lessons scheduled in the 2nd semester of the academic year are carried out, provides that the lessons follow the schedule already planned before the COVID-19 crisis. The lessons are recorded and are available online. Guidelines are prepared for putting in place viable alternatives to on-site exams and students' graduation. Alternative activities are planned to offer support to disabled students. Virtual open days for school students are organised. Everything is now strictly online.

The University of Catania embraced these changes as quickly as possible, although the Athenaeum was not used to working remotely before the quarantine. Before COVID-19, no course of the University of Catania was delivered online. The situation was not dissimilar in Italy, where among the 96 universities, only 11 were telematic and only 21 non-telematic universities provided courses - 131 in total - which can be attended remotely.

As the data from a survey conducted by CRUI (The Conference of Italian University Rectors) to assess the progress of the universities relating to the transition to online teaching https://www.fondazionecrui.it/primo-piano/corona-virus-strumenti-per-la-didattica-digitale/, shows, in March 2020 88% of courses are being offered remotely. Just over a week after the suspension of on-site teaching, many universities have already moved to online-only classes

for instruction, testifying to the enormous effort made by the national university system to deal with the emergency.

PERSONAL AND ACADEMIC CHALLENGES FOR FACULTY AND STUDENTS

The transition to a distance learning system can be considered an unprecedented educational experiment as faculty attempt to transition their courses to online learning. In a week, or maybe just a few days, faculty had to re-organize their courses for a new delivery system. While this is a less-than-ideal method of course development, with no other option, faculty is catapulted in front of the video camera of their computers, driven by their sense of duty and attachment to the institution and by awareness of their educational tasks. Those few universities that have already started online learning in recent years have not suffered the same degree of shock, although there is an increase in the number of online class lectures that they provide for their students.

Many universities, however, in fact, I would say most, find themselves immersed in a forced experimentation that cannot be considered a real experimentation. It is not a question of carefully testing the innovation of distance learning on a national scale and evaluating the results. Scarcely a thought is given to checking with appropriate tools the outcomes of a deliberately planned process, or verifying, for example, how students and teachers are reacting. But above all, perhaps also because of the emergency conditions, discussion on the value of remote learning activities, on the renewal of teaching and assessment methodologies, on the modification of relations between students and teachers is barely addressed with the faculty.

A different pedagogy is required for online teaching and learning and it is a challenge for faculty to seamlessly make this "sudden and unprepared shift from face-to-face to distance teaching and learning" (Marinoni and van't Land, 2020: 13). In the emergency of rapidly setting up a new system, online teaching methods have been mostly ignored: collaborative approaches to the construction of knowledge / building communities of practice, increased student control, choice, and independence in learning processes; new forms of assessment; more opportunities for self-directed and non-formal online learning. Instead, faculty simply transferred traditional methodologies, such as lectures, to the online platform as a way to solve the emergency. This can be explained in part because not all the universities have organised a management structure to develop the teaching capacities of faculty for them to shift towards online learning. This lack of management often "resulted in 'learning by doing' approaches or attempting to imitate what would have been the face-to-face way of proceeding, yet using distance mode" (Marinoni and van't Land, 2020, 13).

Of course, the level of readiness or preparedness of faculty to face this challenge is very diverse. While universities were applying a 'first aid' solution by switching from face-to-face to remote instruction, many educators are realizing that remote learning is "just a baby step experiment in the long journey to offering online education that has been conceived as such, which includes effective student engagement tools and teacher training" (Kandri, 2020). Training of faculty on how to teach remotely, "tailoring the training to allow each academic staff member to define their own plan for content, goals, and learning assessment within the new modality" (WBG, 2020: 4) is one of the main required action and interventions to sustain adaptation to the changing environment for tertiary education.

In Italy, for instance, many educators attend webinars to update their knowledge, organised by scientific-pedagogical associations (e.g. SIREM, Italian Society for Research on Media Education, http://www.sirem.org/), by universities (e.g. University of Milan, https://work.unimi.it/servizi_insegna/ariel/123737.htm) or by the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI, https://www.fondazionecrui.it/argomenti/corsi-e-seminari/).

A positive consequence of this unplanned experiment in distance teaching can be considered the capacity building of faculty who learn new tools to enable distance teaching and learning.

If, instead, we consider university students' perspectives, we find that for many of them online teaching is not an easy option. Smartphones and laptops are not ubiquitous at Italian universities, and there is still a "digital divide," with some students less likely than others to have consistent access to reliable technology. It is taken for granted that everyone owns a personal device, a fast internet connection capable of supporting connections for many hours every day and a dedicated room for them to use when attending online lessons.

Indeed, students in economic distress are more likely to have poor or no internet access - because they cannot afford the cost of a laptop / computer or the internet connection or because they live in regions or neighbourhoods with low connectivity. Some recent data on the impact of coronavirus on educational poverty in Italy (Save the Children report, 2020) tell us that efforts to reach students with online teaching are sometimes nullified by the housing conditions of students. 42% of students live in overcrowded houses, therefore lacking adequate space for study. To this is added 12.3% of 6-17 year olds, who, in 2019, live in homes without devices such as computers or tablets, a percentage that reaches almost 20% in southern Italy. Besides, 57% of those who have a device must share them with other family members for both study and work needs. According to the UNESCO Chair in Population, Migration and Development at the Sapienza University of Rome, "in Italy, about 25% of families do not have a broadband connection and among them, 20.6% are in Trentino – in the north - and 35.7% in Calabria – in the south of Italy. These digital and economic divides, combined with a protracted lockdown, will result in affected students lagging further behind" (UNESCO, 2020).

Also, distance learning requires digital skills to properly use online platforms. Only 30.2% of young people engaged in distance learning have high-level skills, while two-thirds have low or basic digital skills, and 3% have no skills at all (Save the Children report, 2020).

If we consider the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2019 Report, monitoring Member States' digital competitiveness since 2015, Italy ranks 24th out of the 28 EU Member States. Italy performs relatively well, although still below the EU average, as regards connectivity and digital public services, online public services, open data and e-health services. "However, three out of ten people are not regular internet users yet, and more than half of the population still lacks basic digital skills" (EC 2019: 3). Only 44 % of people aged 16-74 years have basic digital skills (57 % in the EU as a whole) and only 92 % of those in the 16-24 age bracket are regular internet users (EC 2019, 9). Theis data puts Italy last in the EU28 (the EU28 average being 97% of people in this age group) and show the urgency of investing more resources in the National Plan for digitalization to tackle the lack of digital skills among young people. Lacking a comprehensive digital skills strategy (there is just a National Plan for Digital Schools), groups at risk of social exclusion are also at risk of a widening digital divide.

All this contributes to determining the risk of university dropout, already high in Italy, and the reduction of enrollments for the next academic year. According to the estimates made by the Talents Venture Observatory, if the contraction of GDP at the end of the year were 9.1% as estimated by the International Monetary Fund, the number of registered students in the 2020/2021 academic year could decrease by about 35,000 or a drop of 11% from the previous year (Osservatorio Talents Venture 2020).

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EMERGENCY DISTANCE TEACHING AND LEARNING: RE-PLANNING EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

The Degree Course for Childhood Educators and Community Educators of the University of Catania (http://www.disfor.unict.it/corsi/l-19) seeks to find solutions to remotely redesign the practicum and professionalizing laboratory activities, which are mandatory for students. The degree program decides to plan the remote activities, trying to maintain their value for the development of the professional identity of the students: activities that bring students directly into the world of work under the tutors' and mentors' guidance (practicum) and those which allow students to experience and experiment in, within a controlled environment (laboratory), the settings in which the early childhood educators and the community educators will work.

A working group formed by the manager of the teaching activities of the Degree Course, two teaching staff and experts from the world of work, in charge of the laboratories, is constituted. The working group decides to try to keep alive – although remotely – the value of the laboratory activities planned to strengthen students' professionalization. The laboratories, of 25 hours each, are therefore organized alternating online plenary sessions and small group sessions.

Each meeting starts with a synchronous plenary session and the working methods are negotiated together with all the participants (30 students per laboratory). Then each group works in online subgroups (remotely monitored by each expert using scaffolding strategies). At the end of the meeting, the results are returned to the plenary and discussed; they are subsequently collected in the e-portfolio that each student is asked to create. Students are asked to reflect upon their learning, to get into the habit of linking and constructing meaning from their experiences. All activities are recorded, so that they are always available to students. Supporting these activities, there is a help desk offering assistance with any difficulties caused by the platform.

This experimental organisation allows course leaders to alternate plenary activities with small group activities, though favouring small group work for students, who currently suffer from long isolation and who, thus, in virtual classrooms, find themselves collaborating and sharing experiences and sensations. Experts from the world of work, who had never experienced the use of the platform and/or distance learning methods, redesign their activities favouring as much as possible experiential learning for the students. The setting up of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) by the university staff and the experts is another significant result arising from this situation: all the participants, during many online meetings, learn to share their knowledge, skills, experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems – in short, supporting each other in tackling the new labs' activities.

More than 550 students successfully participated in online labs. The results from the questionnaire submitted to students show how the level of students satisfaction is linked to the ability of the experts to make the students feel involved, even if at distance (see *Graph. 1*). The organisation of the activities allowed the students to confirm that the knowledge acquired is equivalent to that which they would have acquired in face-to-face meetings.

Graph 1: *Quality of online laboratories*

1st year students: Level of satisfaction	2nd-3rd year students: Level of satisfaction
Nel complesso, ritengo che la qualità dei laboratori a distanza sia stata 210 risposte 1 (0,5%) 3 (1,4%) 32 (15,2%) 118 (56,2%) 56 (26,7%)	Nel complesso, ritengo che la qualità dei laboratori a distanza sia stata 341 risposte 0 (0%) 3 (0,9%) 55 (16,1%) 180 (52,8%) 103 (30,2%)
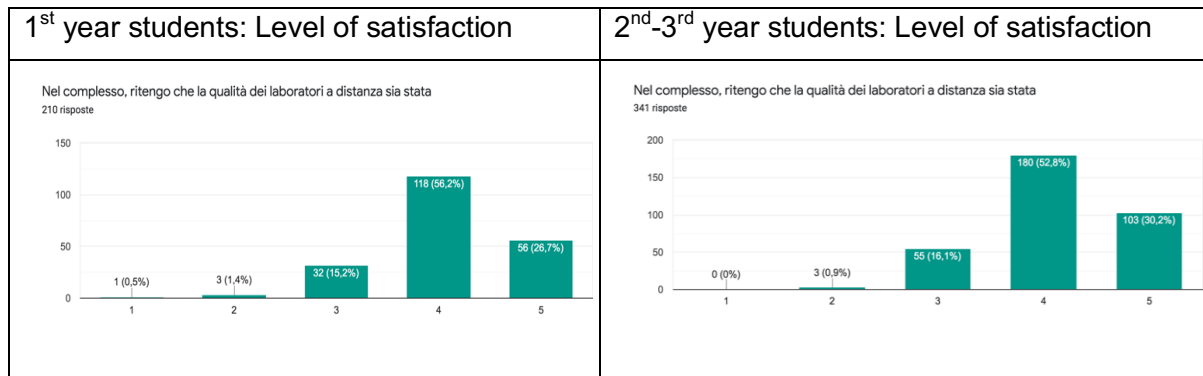
Organizing the practicum appears immediately more complex. In the majority of Italian universities, due to the lockdown, the practicum is suspended or re-organized as online lectures, analysis of case studies and group discussion, since it is impossible to access all the educational centres (formal and non-formal).

However, this organisation drastically reduces the value of the practicum as an opportunity for students to increase their knowledge of their future work settings, to engage in continual dialogue with their workplace supervisor, to share ideas, to receive formative feedback and to encourage reflective thinking about the practicum experience.

The degree course group in charge for the practicum, composed of 6 faculty and 1 staff, then decide to identify associations in the area that have managed to continue their activities remotely. A survey is conducted on the number of educational centres (nursery schools; kindergartens; community centres for teenagers, disabled people, elderly and refugees ...) to verify whether they were open or if they were able to provide online activities during the lockdown phase. Out of 48 possible respondents, 43 educational centres answered the survey. Of these, 61% say they are carrying out remote activities, but less than 20% consider it possible to organise the practicum with students or indicate their willingness to participate in organizing the online practicum.

Together with the few educational centres available (n = 5), the working group decide to re-design activities and co-design them together with academic tutors, workplace mentors and students involved in the practicum.

The hypothesis of online traineeships implemented by the working group starts from the assumption that these activities should include all the standards for good quality traineeships. They must have a clear description of field experience activities; defined and constant tutoring; well-defined assessment tasks, and the recognition of the learning path. To create the online practicum, it is essential to encourage cooperation and efficient communication between all the actors involved (including students).

The online practicum is structured into 3 phases:

1. a preparatory introductory phase of the online practicum with students, academic tutors and workplace mentors. The academic tutors and workplace mentors must meet in the initial phase to coordinate the activities;

2. an intermediate phase, which involves the actual practice of traineeship, monitored remotely by the workplace mentor. A set of materials (articles, analysis of national and regional laws and regulations about the profession of educators) and additional activities (video viewing, analysis of case studies, video-lessons recorded by experts) supplements the training path of the trainee;

3. a final phase of evaluation of the course by academic tutors and workplace mentors.

The practicum is realized using the TEAMS platform, which allows separate virtual spaces for tutors, mentors and students. Students are required to submit a reflective diary for each day of activity, a register with an indication of the activities carried out and an e-portfolio that includes the students' personalized study components.

Mentoring by the company is considered of particular importance, as is the supervision and coordination of the university. The working group agrees that mentors and tutors must provide the necessary motivational support to students, both to reduce the risk of lack of interest in the online practice and to encourage students to be active in their learning.

An immediate consequence that arises from the design work is a more intense relationship between centres and universities. The organisation of the practicum is, normally, a fairly consolidated (and bureaucratic) relationship; this, however, often reduces the possibility of a deeper reflective collaboration between universities and educational centres. Thanks to the situation created by the lockdown, the relationship between institutions and universities has turned into a truly collaborative relationship.

In working with the university in this way, the educational centres see the opportunity to rethink their practices and to improve professional development activities for their mentors. The university considers the meetings an opportunity to learn more about the territory and the professional needs of the region, and to align more closely with the needs of society in its hinterland.

FINAL REMARKS

In conclusion, the impact of COVID-19 has affected positively the partnership between this degree course and the educational centres in the region, creating new kinds of relationships with partner institutions and strengthening existing links.

The results point to the capacity of the degree course to react promptly to the crisis and profit from new opportunities offered by the critical situation. Our experience shows that the pandemic gave all stakeholders "a better understanding of our current education systems' vulnerabilities and shortcomings" (Kandri, 2020); at the same time, it gave us the chance to re-think educational practices and to find new ways of strengthening partnership for education. This confirms the importance of higher education for society and shows that it can offer a valid contribution in the crisis debates (Marinoni and de Wit, 2020), helping to minimise the severe risk of growing inequality through more collaboration between higher education institutions, governments, the private sector and society.

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