# ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE IMPACT OF COVID-19: IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND UNIVERSITY LIFELONG LEARNING

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## INTRODUCTION

Never before has the higher education sector being challenged the way it has been in the last few months, triggered by the disruption caused by the pervasiveness of the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced higher education institutions to change the way that they have been teaching. Almost overnight, higher education institutions had to move to distance teaching to ensure that learning occurs even in the midst of a lockdown (Marinoni, van't Land & Jensen, 2020, p. 23). However, this move depended by and large on availability of information, communication infrastructure, technological devices, internet connectivity as well as capacities to teach online (ibid., pp. 24–26). Many students were also not well prepared or competent to study online as they were struggling with motivation, finding support or an adequate learning environment for remote learning (Means, Neisler, with Langer Research Associates, 2020; QS, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic did not only force higher education institutions to move online, but it also highlighted some challenges in relation to inclusivity and accessibility. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the need to train, retrain and reskill people for the demands of the knowledge economy that is highly digitalised, systematically excluding people due to lack of digital skills, connection or digital device. In time of crisis, the tendency is to focus on the short-term solutions, but as a result from the Covid-19 pandemic there is the risk of higher education institutions losing their mission. Therefore, it appears necessary to think about long-term solutions for the present as well as for the future to lead to the broadening of access and to ensure inclusiveness designed to achieve an equitable learning that promotes sustainable development, according to the *Sustainable Development Goal 4* (United Nations, 2015).

The key to active citizenship is embedded in lifelong learning because it aims at giving people a chance, irrespective of their background, to participate in higher education. The concept of lifelong learning is rooted on the individuals' need to pursue learning activities with the purpose of personal fulfilment, therefore, lifelong learning as a visionary concept includes all forms of learning, including formal, non-formal and informal learning (Zepke, 2017). The need for lifelong learning has never been so acute as it is during the Covid-19 pandemic: Many higher education institutions have had to adapt their mode of delivery to digital spaces, which requires new knowledge, skills and competencies. In this sense, the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the need for education beyond formal qualifications. Given this, it is imperative that higher education institutions begin to rethink their provision of teaching and learning to address the future they aspire for.

## APPROACHES

Policies and concerns on lifelong learning affect the missions and conceptions of a higher education that aims at accessibility and inclusivity. Political agencies, such as OECD, UNESCO as well as the EU, offered different approaches to lifelong learning and integrating

the concept of citizenship (Jarvis, 2008). In this manner, lifelong learning has a political purpose, which is based on the fact that "active citizens should be informed, knowledgeable, and able to participate in public debate" (ibid., p. 47) in order to foster social justice, participation and sustainable development. An education geared to citizenship addresses the 'responsible agent' based on the idea that individual action has global impact (Nikolitsa-Winter, Mauch & Maalouf, 2019). What this means for education in general and higher education in particular is to provide the skills that are needed to respond to the global challenges of the 21$^{st}$ century by fostering democratic, plural, diverse and collective civic engagement (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020, p. 4). In this regard, lifelong learning in higher education provides academic knowledge transfer, but in a broader understanding it can serve as "fora in which a society can critically reflect on itself" (Field, Schmidt-Hertha & Waxenegger, 2016, p. 230).

According to Brennan and Naidoo (2008, pp. 287–288) higher education has both, an *import* and an *export role*: It imports political discussions and agendas to shape social justice within higher education, and exports their internal processes to impact in the shaping of societies and the quality of the life of individuals (ibid.). Therefore, lifelong learning education is associated with the notion of flexible pathways for working and educating in order to acquire and adapt capabilities over the lifespan (UIL, 2020). In this sense, realising accessible and inclusive higher education is both a question of widening participation in higher education as well as the contribution of higher education to society. The results that are presented in this paper focus on the individuals' learning opportunities in higher education as brought forth by Brennan and Naidoo (2008) who consider this perspective as strongly related with shaping society in terms of opening up opportunities for citizenship and participation.

## COVID-19 AND THE NEED TO RESPOND

With regard to the aforementioned, the Covid-19 pandemic challenges higher education institutions to rethink their missions and to redefine their roles connected to public responsibility to ensure accessible and inclusive learning opportunities. This finally challenges the perception that many have of higher education institutions as "ivory towers, detached from the society in which they are situated" (Hammer, 2018, p. 141), and in which lifelong learning and citizenship are neglected.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the whole education system, there is limited data on long-term consequences. It could therefore be assumed that most *Sustainable Development Goals* (United Nations, 2015) will be affected negatively by the Covid-19 pandemic (Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Lafortune, Fuller & Woelm, 2020) in view of emerging issues surrounding the fragility of societies, deepened inequalities, social and digital divides or lack of technological skills (UNESCO, 2020). It is on the basis of this that more than 80 percent of higher education institutions in Europe are keen to explore new ways of teaching in response to the changes of the last months (EUA, 2020, pp. 3–4). This move is understandable, considering that Covid-19 almost invariably has influenced how teaching and learning is provided in higher education worldwide (Marinoni, van't Land & Jensen, 2020, p. 23).

It therefore becomes important that planning for these new solutions should be designed in a way that ensures equitable university lifelong learning opportunities. Higher education institutions are now required to make use of the new opportunities and to face up to the new challenges, which questions the future relationship between remote and physical learning and the flexibility and quality of teaching. Imagining that lifelong learning is key to support diverse and inclusive learning (Finn, Fitzsimons, Crummell & Noone, 2018), it seems obvious that higher education institutions need to embrace lifelong learning as a tool to encourage active participation and citizenship.

## METHODOLOGY

To address the need to respond to new ways of structuring teaching and learning during and post-Covid-19, data was collected from three focus groups of eleven experts who are working as researchers, lecturers and managers in higher education institutions around the globe. These experts who were interviewed in May and June 2020 are members of the *University of the Future Network (UFN),* whose aim is to shape transformations that current universities need to have in order to respond to the new learners' needs and expectations (UFN, n. d.).

The aim of the focus groups was to contribute to re-visioning the future of teaching and learning in higher education while responding to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Attention was given to transversal issues that are common to the education agenda specifically on the use of technologies to ensure equitable access to traditionally excluded communities. Discussions focused on visionary paths regarding teaching and learning in higher education, challenges and opportunities and significant conditions that need to be in place to ensure accessibility and inclusivity in higher education. Participants in the focus groups also gave an outlook on how visioning of teaching and learning in higher education might look like post-Covid-19.

The focus group discussions were guided by the *UNESCO Futures of Education* initiative (UNESCO, n. d.) and the results were compiled into a report to inform the initiative (Schulte, Cendon & Makoe, 2020). Although many themes emanated from the discussions, the findings that this paper focusses on are those that addressed issues of accessibility and inclusivity in higher education. And these were addressed in relation to their implications for active citizenship and university lifelong learning.

## FINDINGS

Initial scientific discussions address potentials and risks, equally, and range from a vision of the pandemic as accelerator for innovation and transformation of teaching and learning in higher education (EUA, 2020; Reimers, 2020), to new chances for more equitable and inclusive higher education (Arnove, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2020), but also to an increasing inequality among learners in higher education, especially those form poorer countries (Altbach & de Wit, 2020).

The findings of the focus groups are in line with previous findings that support that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic will lead to teaching and learning innovation in higher education. Visionary paths that the experts identified for the future were related to the strengthening of blended and online approaches in higher education. They also predicted that students will become more demanding on where, how and what they want to study. What this means is that individual students will look for those study programmes that address their needs making education more student-centred and personalised. To provide support for this new personalised way of teaching and learning, higher education institutions will need to pool together their knowledge on pedagogical and technological resources to facilitate openness in higher education. This will also lead to an increased and easier collaboration between higher education institutions with companies and civil society. In this sense, the experts saw the crisis as an accelerator for digital change and the opportunity to rethink and transform a higher education geared to aspired futures.

The experts also raised challenges and barriers in relation to the capability of students to transition to online and to the lack of online teaching skills that still remain on the part of lecturers. In view of these findings, the experts identified the following key areas of digital

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divide that are emerging, especially affecting most people who come from poorly resourced environment, such as inequalities in terms of:

- Connectivity – access to internet, availability of information and communication infrastructure
- Devices – ownership of digital equipment such as smart phones, laptops and/or desktop computers that provide different types of learning experiences
- Digital Literacy Skills – competencies needed to use technologies to teach and learn in an online space

Some of these challenges are linked to social conditions such as a lack of healthy learning environment at home or living in an urban centre with good digital infrastructure as opposed to living in a remote rural area that has connectivity problems. All these reinforces the digital divide by excluding those with limited access to technological tools that make learning possible.

Another barrier identified was the one that relates to the resistance to change as key to undermining progress. The experts describe it as tension between turning towards a new normal and reverting back to traditional ways of doing things. This is because many lecturers might have felt that they were forced to pivot to online and were not necessarily motivated to change. For change to occur, strong leadership is seen as crucial to drive innovation and to support structural changes that are needed. At the same time, some students are happy with going online and others may not want to change. This requires the need to actively engage students and to provide learning experience according to the expectations of students.

In order to realise an accessible and inclusive higher education the experts suggest that teaching and learning in higher education should:

- Bridge the digital divide that manifests in different types of inequalities and foster social justice by including students' different ways of learning;
- Support online and autonomous learning to achieve skills for self-directed learning as well as data literacy;
- Diversify higher education by embracing open education principles of access and inclusivity to address the social justice mandate of education;
- Adopt blended learning approaches to ensure that education is accessible to students with a diversity of needs;
- Address the gross inequalities in higher education by providing flexible personalisation of learning and supporting students' individual learning pathways.

The results provide a basis for discussions on how to actively rethink teaching and learning in higher education that ensures accessible and inclusive learning conditions that are needed to foster sustainable development and citizens that are engaged.


## IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND UNIVERSITY LIFELONG LEARNING

Bridging the social and digital divide that has accelerated through Covid-19 and higher education moving online is key to ensuring participation and active citizenship. Closely connected to that is customising teaching and supporting students' individual learning pathways as an opportunity to foster social justice and civil engagement. This is linked with the individuals and their needs to be self-motivated and self-adaptive in order to be resilient even in the face of disruptive changes and uncertainty. To achieve this, higher education

institutions need to integrate the students' voices in the planning, designing and developing of teaching and learning approaches to support students' individual learning pathways.

Moreover, it is important that higher education institutions and governments address the issue of the digital divide by ensuring that all students irrespective of their circumstances and where they live should have access to connectivity and technological tools and enablers. It is also critical that people are retrained on digital literacy skills in order to adapt to new ways of teaching and learning. This calls for a higher education environment that allows for personalised and flexible learning opportunities and gives students the opportunity to autonomously choose the most suitable approach for learning.

According to Osborne, Rimmer & Houston (2015, pp. 34-36) fostering lifelong learning opportunities in higher education is not only a question of access, but also of the flexibility of the delivery of learning that promotes retention and progression (ibid.). In this sense, university lifelong learning can be seen as key to serve as an enabling space to provide lifelong learners the competencies that are needed to perform in a new environment. It is therefore the task of higher education institutions to create learning opportunities that meet possible future requirements from teaching and learning as well as the development systems and structures that enable learning.

## CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way we think about the future. Although the nature of education is about preparing people for the future, this discussion has never been the focus of higher education until recently. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront the lack of agility and flexibility in the higher education sector, of which, all of us suddenly have to seriously think on how to guarantee a sustained business continuity for teaching and learning. To address some of the challenges that are brought about by the crisis, decision makers tend to look at short-term solutions. However, we need to be cautious not to remain in an 'emergency' mode for long.

Hence, it becomes necessary to establish visions for a higher education that questions how current changes will affect the future, how they can be addressed and how to adapt these changes in a beneficial way in order to ensure lifelong learning opportunities for all. This can be seen as a continuous proactive rethinking process in terms of doing things differently. These processes are fundamental for establishing viable strategies on how to deal with change for the future we aspire for within our higher education institutions and within our teaching and learning. In this sense, higher education institutions need to rethink their teaching and learning approaches in order to address the deepened inequalities and to create sustained learning conditions that are needed. By so doing, they will be re-visioning the future of higher education in order to achieve its objective of making purposeful contributions to the learning environment while tackling social, political and economic needs in the world and thus, promoting active citizenship.

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