CIVIS
A European Civic University

BEYOND THE TURBULENCES: HIGHER EDUCATION AS FACTOR OF STABILITY

CIVIS Statement

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When times are piled high with difficulties, society and different social groups need reference points, milestones to keep the "right" balance and to find resources for successfully crossing instabilities.

In particular, these days, when life and health are under threat, when basic democratic values and rights (like the freedom of movement, the right to work, the right to meet and the freedom of association etc.) are under scrutiny and require adjustments, the role of education becomes even more important.

Higher education systems are not only "producers" of new generations of qualified labour force that keep economies going, but they also have other key roles, more visible and meaningful under present day circumstances:

- A university is a factor of social stability and predictability;

- A university is a safe emotional space for interaction and socialization;

- A university is challenging minds and institutional behaviours towards agile learning and innovation;

- A university is a promoter of civic engagement; institutional priorities should be organized around this value, as it becomes more important for Europe and for democratic societies worldwide.

Taking all of these into account, the CIVIS Consortium held a webinar focused on how to finalize in reasonable conditions this university year and what lessons are to be learned for the future, trying, at the same time, to keep up with all the above mentioned roles.

The participants, coming from different levels of governance and expertise, members of the task forces of Innovative pedagogies, Virtual mobility and Education/ study programs, used this opportunity to identify the challenges these eight universities are facing, but also the opportunities that lie ahead for higher education institutions.
The lessons we have learned these days in the eight European universities are also messages that we would like to convey to the broader audience in the higher education arena across Europe and beyond.

1. Persisting when is difficult: scenario-based governance

As learning was challenged, so was the management and governance of universities. At the same time, we are about to handle a crisis, a completely unusual and unpredictable situation, but, with determination and maturity, we are committed to work on future scenarios. We are planning for "multiple realities", as we don't know how the future will look like. All CIVIS universities recognize the need for agility and increased capacity to react to a diversity of situations, especially in the next university year.

> **"It is important not only to react to emergency situations, but to also have contingency plans."** - *Anca Nedelcu, Vice-dean, University of Bucharest*

We have to start designing now the post-pandemic future of higher education and to reflect on our governance models, to make them more effective and more responsive, more capable to learn, share and act in connection, as a network. In this context, the future of European universities will not be only about learning in a traditional way, but also about an interconnected process: learning – unlearning – relearning.

2. Maintain quality, ensure equality

The unprecedented migration of education towards virtual environments and platforms also raised substantial issues related to eliminating barriers of access to quality learning due to scarce resources or limited skills. The uneven distribution of resources among students was compensated through the distribution of technology and connectivity, the creation of special spaces for accessing learning resources respecting safety provisions, peer learning support networks etc. The new concept of "digital poverty" will also challenge academic institutions, in terms of offering equal opportunities to learn and relearn new educational practices.

Transferring learning in the online environment was also very demanding and pedagogically challenging for many professors. This is why universities created support systems and task forces, advisory bodies to help maintain the quality of education. Maintaining quality and ensuring that students can access and cope with the new learning challenges is a necessity. A whole generation will graduate soon from our universities, from Bachelor, master, doctoral and postdoctoral programs. They have the right to finalize in good conditions their studies, to get the certification, while universities have the responsibility to keep providing qualified and motivated citizens and future employees.

> "The huge problem of equity (equal access to education) in term of attending courses and also in terms of evaluation will be an important landmark for future reflection."
> *- Romita Iucu, President, Board of Trustees, University of Bucharest*

3. Consolidate digital support systems

The last couple of months came with substantial investments or plans for investment in the information and communication technologies infrastructure. Some organizations and people were more prepared for accommodating the new needs, some were less prepared, but we all had to make the best use of the digital resources at our disposal. We have realized that any resistance to the adoption of technologies stood no chance in front of this challenge, but also that many of our activities, including courses, could be more flexible and adapted to the needs of the students if we come up with more flexibility and learning support mechanisms.

CIVIS is committed to use technology to stimulate and advance cooperation in learning and research using tools for digital classrooms, virtual campuses, blended mobilities – old, but also new concepts coming again into attention, directly from implementation, not from theory.

4. Consideration to well-being of students and staff

While logistics and capacity are not to be ignored (investing in technology, competence to work on learning management systems, redesign work and institutional functioning etc.), we need to see beyond the "tip of the iceberg". We have to make sure that our students, the academic and administrative staff are feeling confident and taken care of, to easily address also emotional and social difficulties generated by isolation, fear and anxiety, change of working habits etc. Universities developed different mechanisms for counselling, psychological support and professional advice available online. University has to take care of its members, and care encompasses emotional and social stability.

5. Boost innovation in pedagogy

Most probably, we are assisting to the largest pedagogical experiment from all times, and we shall learn as much as we can from it. All academia was challenged and the learning process and practices are particularly challenged. Although the accelerated digitalization that we have witnessed in the last months was the result of an unpredicted situation, we can use the opportunity to identify and strengthen innovative pedagogies, emerging in the online learning environment, but not only. CIVIS universities exchanged examples of pedagogical innovation, some related to this pandemic, some related to regular academic practice, because the capacity to innovate and support creative approaches is one of the key skills of all actors in these unstable and disruptive times.

> "On the long and medium term, we have to take care more of the pedagogical challenge. Because the presence of devices and technologies doesn't necessarily bring with it capacity, knowledge and adaptability, both of professors. But this is the opportunity that we can use now to encourage our academic staff to test out, to innovate learning and finally to reward and praise innovation."
> - *Lucian Ciolan, Vice-rector, University of Bucharest*

CIVIS consortium is willing to co-create long term solutions for authentic learning experiences, based on pedagogical innovation, emerging from this new educational context.

Conclusion:

Higher education institutions need to unlearn the conventional way of planning and delivering education, through new pathways of learning based on an innovative pedagogical approaches.
Academic careers should be reoriented and rebalanced, in terms of revalorisation of teaching and learning, not only as a collection of practices, but also as cornerstone - values that will inspire a new generation of students.

Due to recent situation related to the coronavirus lockdown, universities will be challenged to be more proactive in developing complex and intensified virtual mobility initiatives, complementary to "classical" face to face interactions. The European initiative towards consortialization in higher education is being led by pilot projects funded under a first dedicated round of Erasmus and CIVIS is part of this endeavour. There are many more to come in the future, according to the plan. This pilot activities were "hit" by the pandemic crisis and have to reinvent themselves along the way. But the high level of commitment and the multidimensional and rapidly growing alliance proves to be a fantastic reserve of energy for all.
Is an admirable position to see how, in spite of all difficulties, the eight partners continue to work together and try to contribute to a new shape of higher education in Europe. The five strategic options CIVIS embraced now are also our modest suggestion and advice for the other colleagues in universities of the world.