

Response to Covid-19

Scenario of exceptionality.

Uncertain futures.

Challenges and open opportunities.

University of the Future Network Manifesto

With this document, The University of the Future Network (<https://unifuture.network>) sets out its position in the framework of the exceptional situation that higher education institutions are experiencing throughout the world. With this manifesto, we would like to contribute to the reflection and exchange of ideas for the joint construction of the future of higher education.

1. Situation of exceptionality and evaluation of future scenarios

The pandemic decreed by the WHO as a consequence of the massive spread of Covid-19 has had a direct impact on education throughout the world. According to UNESCO data, classrooms in primary, secondary and higher education are closed in most countries of the world impacting 87.6% of total enrolled learners worldwide. (<https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies/coronavirus-school-closures>). We are facing a situation of unprecedented educational exceptionality.

To address this exceptional situation, universities and higher education institutions around the world have started to offer their learners the possibility of continuing their education using online communication systems and proprietary or existing online educational resources. This option has requested the provision of accelerated training for faculty and the need of making resources available to them in order to continue their daily work.

But beyond the transformation of current teaching practices, we believe that this situation will have an impact on the ways and methods we currently use to access and acquire knowledge. It is clear that we need to build learning spaces beyond traditional methods of memorization, where the instructor is the knowledge holder, and immediately start exploring opportunities and strategies that will allow students to share and learn not only theoretical concepts but also hands-on skills (such as the use of virtual simulations and artificial intelligence).

We must be aware that the result of this period of exceptionality will have unexpected effects on the evolution of academic programs and on student learning. We cannot pretend that the result of such a novel situation will leave us back to normal when it is gone. We do not want this to happen. We must therefore provide contingency measures for the immediate future to alleviate adverse outcomes and think boldly about the construction of innovative

scenarios where teaching and learning happens at another level, where imagination plays a crucial role.

Therefore, from The University of the Future Network, we call on universities and post-secondary institutions to evaluate future scenarios with which to alleviate the adverse results of this period, and to share them with other institutions. We invite all innovators and educational thinkers to work collaboratively in the evaluation of possible solutions to the current scenario with the goal of innovating the entire future of education.

2. Opportunity for networking and collegial work for the construction of open education environments

In the exceptional situation we are currently living, caused by Covid-19, universities around the world have started to open up to sharing resources and tools that allow learners, instructors, and researchers, to share teaching and resources online. This exchange, we have noticed, is not only regional or national, but global. As with other globalized experiences, we have noticed that among the many challenges for this sharing practices to be effective (such as the local culture, access to technologies, attitude of openness and flexibility) a common understanding of the potential that networks and collaborative work has in the transformation of the future of education remains to be the most important one.

The pandemic situation we are living opens up also an opportunity for the creation of university collaboration networks – initially perhaps in the area of strategies and resources for online teaching – that could bring academics and researchers, industry and universities to develop collaborative strategies for action. It is clear for us that this is a crucial time to share open resources, to make our knowledge production available to us, to share and not to hide.

Therefore, from “The University of the Future Network”, we invite post-secondary and higher education institutions to collaborate in the creation of support networks to facilitate actions that could help the development of online teaching, as well as the creation and sharing of open educational resources, not only within our academic spaces, but also in supporting the workplace and the work of industry.

3. The impact of information and communication technologies in learning for the future

Another area where the current quarantine situation will have an impact is the possibilities of technology use and applications to education, in particular for face-to-face education institutions. It is a bit strange to think that we needed such a big push for institutions to seriously start considering alternative ways of education beyond the synchronous interactions that happen inside a classroom. We really hope that the ‘state of urgency’ for the use of online learning will become a norm for the near future. Technology has promised, since the start of

the personal computer, the transformation of non-presence spaces where learning process take place. This use will definitely lead to changes in the design of training, the times where we learn, and the use of formal and informal venues for the acquisition and sharing of ideas and knowledge.

We envision that after this situation of exceptionality we will know better the potential of the existing open educational resources in Internet, and the way to select and distribute them correctly. Likewise, we will have increased the number of resources available on cyberspace once institutions, instructors, and organizations have shared their resources on the Internet.

Learners will also be transformed from this situation of exceptionality. We hope that they will discover new educational uses for technologies they currently use for leisure or as channels of communication. And that they will also learn new ways of working in groups and new initiatives to help each other as they explore knowledge and content.

Therefore, from The University of the Future Network, we invite institutions of higher education to explore the potential of technologies in the transformation of their current teaching and learning practices. To become leaders and visionaries in the use and applications of information and communication technologies in the radical transformation of learning in the 21st Century. We believe that using technologies is no longer a choice, but an urgency measure to make education accessible by all.

4. Access and Participation (Digital divide second generation)

The isolation and the impossibility to have face-to-face meetings and classes made some "submerged" elements jump into visibility: it is the case of digital divide. Also, in the richest countries it is becoming very clear how a first-level digital divide still exists, in terms of scarce availability of broadband connectivity, if not for the possession of devices. But this scenario mainly brought up, again, the long-lasting problem of second-level digital divide, as it was defined by Hargittai in 2002 as the difference in skills. Access for people in disadvantaged areas, from disadvantaged social context, or experiencing other kinds of barriers to learning are those more at risk of exclusion in this specific situation, where it is easy to miss the point that technology and online learning must be equalizers, not prerequisites.

It is necessary that educational institutions at all levels face this specific problem by taking care of the accessibility of their content, of their processes, and in general of their strategies for online communication. Without a specific framework to remind every involved person that it is the responsibility of all of us, as a society, to create more inclusive (learning) environments, we all run into the risk of creating future scenarios that will destroy all efforts of universal access to information, culture and knowledge that many institutions have so far fought for.

The costs might be higher now in terms of costs and energies, but we can all make use of this time of forced digitalization of many processes to expand our awareness of problems that many people live with in ordinary situations.

Conclusions and looking forward

Even if it will be impossible and irresponsible to arrive to any conclusions at this moment, the Future of the University Network would like to underline the following statement. It is urgent that educational institutions do not seek to return to the situation before the crisis but build on what has been learned about access to teaching, learning, and technologies. We are only looking at the start of this transformation, and we are hopeful it will reach every learner around the globe.

Signed by University of the Future Network members

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