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Re-Visioning the Future of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

Report on Focus Group Discussions for the
UNESCO Futures of Education Initiative

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1. Introduction and Background

The growing necessity of reforming the education system is based on the need to address the changing world of the 21st century. Higher education institutions like other educational institutions are on the cusp of major disruption that is created in part by globalisation, digitalisation and recently the growing pandemic caused by Covid-19. To maintain the provision of teaching and learning under Covid-19 lockdown led many educational institutions to adopt a remote and online learning approach as a way of ensuring that learning takes place even during this time of crisis. Never before has the education sector being challenged the way it has been in the last few months and it illustrated that changes can happen faster than expected. In time of crisis the tendency is to focus on the short term solutions and to ignore what is likely to be faced in the post crisis. However, it is precisely during the crisis that the focus should also be on the future developments in higher education to ensure broadening access and equity to relevant high-quality programmes and services designed to achieve learning for sustainable development as the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 2015) claims.

This means that the higher education sector needs to think about possible future requirements from teaching and learning as well as from an organisational perspective. This is mainly driven by the growth of technologies; the changing job markets; and growing globalisation. All these factors have led to an increased demand for new skills and competencies. For this reason, higher education is expected to respond to these needs. Hence, the need to re-vision the future of teaching and learning in higher education is based on articulating the aspirations for the future. This vision is meant to outline the higher education desire to achieve its objective of making purposeful contributions to the learning environment while tackling social, political and economic needs in the world. It is in response to this need that academics and researchers from around the globe established the *University of the Future Network (UFN)* with the purpose of developing policies and strategies for the transformation of higher education institutions. The UFN is challenging the dominant university model by making recommendations that will shape the future of higher education (UFN, n. d.).

In 2017, members of the UFN initiated a research project with the focus on future developments in teaching and learning in higher education. Interviews were conducted in 2017¹ and 2018 with experts in the field. Findings from the interviews revealed three central themes that are required to support the university of the future: *Strategy* as driver of the vision of the university; *Practices* that guide the implementation of the vision; and *Structural Systems* that need to be in place to support the vision. Strategic issues that were identified by the experts included issues around disruptive effects of technology; increased demand for higher education; and convergence of online and classroom based education. Issues that covered implementation practices included technology-enhanced teaching and learning practices; changing roles of lecturers in a digital era; and instructional design. Structural related issues dealt with curriculum and its relevance; digital integration into the university systems; and changing leadership roles.

¹ A video report emphasizes topics and issues on teaching and learning in higher education mentioned in the interviews 2017, see <https://unifuture.network/2019/04/the-digitalization-of-the-university-of-the-future-video-interviews-from-the-hagen-meeting/>

From the perspective of the UFN the need is given to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic and its impacts on the future of higher education (UFN, 2020).² Higher education institutions are expected to put measures in place to ensure sustained continuity of education beyond the Covid-19 crisis. These measures may include operational factors such as transformation of teaching practices; development of technological capacity; alternative ways of delivering education; and setting up systems and structures to support new business models. All these factors have a potential to impact the future ways and methods of accessing and acquiring knowledge.

2. Methodology

In addressing “Knowledge Production, Access and Governance” as well as “Citizenship and Participation” as outlined by the *International Commission on the Futures of Education* (2020), this report focusses on re-visioning the future of higher education post Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has not only disrupted the current education system, but it has also redefined the landscape of higher education and the need to come up with new ways of teaching and learning not only during Covid-19 but in the future. To address this need, data was collected in May and June 2020 from three focus groups of eleven experts who are members of the UFN and working as researchers, lecturers and managers in higher education institutions around the globe. 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. In this sense, the experts were invited to respond and discuss the following questions:

1. Which visionary paths can be seen with regard to teaching and learning in higher education in the future and which key challenges and opportunities are related to these visionary paths?
2. What are the significant conditions that need to be in place to ensure accessibility and inclusivity in higher education?
3. How will visioning of teaching and learning in higher education will look like post Covid-19?

Following the focus groups, themes were identified and clustered via content structuring and summative qualitative analysis (Mayring, 2014). The initial themes that emanated from the data were blended learning; digital divide; personalisation of learning as well as collaboration between different stakeholders in the education sector; and policy issues. All these themes featured more prominently in the 2020 data than they did in the 2017 data. This was influenced mainly by the context in which data was collected. With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic many educational institutions had to pivot to remote online learning. However, many institutions did so even when they were not ready to move to online learning. These actions brought to fore challenges of lack of access to technologies and connectivity; and insufficient competencies of teaching in a digital space. These findings were similar to those reported in the recently published *Global Education Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2020).

² In a manifesto UFN sets out its position in the framework of the Covid-19 pandemic that higher education institutions are experiencing throughout the world to contribute to the reflection and exchange of ideas for the joint construction of the future of higher education.

3. Presentation of Results

The results of the focus group discussions firstly outline the visionary paths of teaching and learning in higher education as well as opportunities and challenges. The second element focuses on the significant conditions for accessibility and inclusivity in higher education and finally, the visioning of teaching and learning in higher education post Covid-19 is presented.

3.1. Visionary Paths of Teaching and Learning

Blended and Online Learning Approach

The theme on blended and online learning approaches was seen by many as something that the future cannot do without. This was further confirmed by the Covid-19 crisis that forced higher education institutions to move online in a very short space of time. Many higher education institutions are going to incorporate both campus-based and distance teaching. In future, this might lead to strategies for offering more diversified ways of teaching and not only digital or face-to-face. Universities will have to utilise a number of online strategies, using multiple platforms as well as different ways of delivering content. Many campus-based universities may have to incorporate online components into their systems and some open universities may have to use video conferencing apps such as Zoom to teach students remotely. One of the benefits of this approach is mentioned that "suddenly there was only one expert lecturer who was lecturing to all 50 groups. And the tutors were dealing with them in smaller Zoom meetings. And many students really liked it. So, we are now going to change the whole infrastructure of our courses" (UFN2, Pos. 45-46).³ Hence, the role and value of the face-to face tuition for the future is also under scrutiny. Even though delivery modes may change, some experts stated that, university buildings will nevertheless continue to play an important role as a place where people meet and socialise.

Personalisation of Learning

Many experts pointed out that the personalisation of learning approach offers flexible opportunities for students which is what is needed in the future. The concept of personalisation of learning is based on the use of learning analytics that are utilised to tailor educational services to the individual student. The idea is to use processes and practices that are flexible to respond to unique needs of an individual. Central to flexible learning is student centeredness that provides students with increased choice of what and when they want to learn and they will be able to choose their best options to customise and personalise their individual learning experience. This approach ensures that all students are included by offering multiple programmes for diverse students. The flexible movement of students and lecturers is seen as key to opening up education as well as supporting professional collaboration.

Collaboration Across Universities and Institutions

Collaboration was one area that was perceived as an important component of the future of higher education. Different types of higher education institutions will emerge and this will lead to cross-university research as well as allowing students the mobility to take courses in multiple universities. In the future, "[w]e will see transformation or differences in the kinds of institutions, maybe more networking in institutions, probably different institutions will merge in order to be able to attend to more and more people and new possibilities" (UFN3,

³ The abbreviations and codes serve the allocation of the cited text passages in the anonymised focus group discussions.

Pos. 14). Even Ivy League universities might to some extent offer the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) format to ensure that their sustainability in future is retained.

3.1.1. Opportunities

Crisis as Accelerator for Digital Change

Covid-19 has accelerated digital change in a manner that has never happened before. It did not only transform teaching, but it also brought to spotlight some of the challenges of going online without any warning. While there was resistance to move to online space in higher education in particular, the pandemic has forced virtually everyone in the education sector to use technology to enhance teaching and learning during this period. One expert mentioned that the use of “technology has been around in the space of teaching and learning for the last 30 years. But it only took this nasty pandemic to get it right on top, from removing it from under the carpet to being right on top” (UFN1, Pos. 26). Due to this crisis, the need for a virtual learning environment cannot be underestimated and therefore it has to be implemented quickly in a very short time.

Chance to Rethink Higher Education

The current crisis situation provides the opportunity to create an aspired future and to rethink the purpose of higher education and to transform education system as a whole to ensure that it addresses the future we want: “[W]e need to begin to rethink what higher education is and its purpose and remember this purpose was not for today. It was a purpose that was created 500 years ago and we just tweak it here and there and we continue with it” (UFN1, Pos. 122).

3.1.2. Challenges

Digital Literacy Skills for Learning

One central challenge is the capability of students to move online. This is strongly related to the issue of accessibility and inclusivity in higher education. One aspect that was brought to the fore by this pandemic is the lack of technical equipment, internet access and connectivity, and the lack of relevant skills to use technology for learning. Even when students owned digital devices, they did not have the necessary competencies of using them for online learning purposes. The lack of capability may lead some students to resent rather than embrace technology for learning. Therefore, the challenge is to provide students with digital literacy skills because even though “the students who are the generation we call X, Y or Z or whatever they know how to do a lot of things online, not exactly how to study. So [...] we need to provide them with good computer literacy for studying online” (UFN2, Pos. 51).

Online Teaching Competencies

Since the crisis, lecturers were expected to teach online without knowledge and skills necessary for online teaching. Some experts argue that lecturers continue to teach online like they did in the face-to-face setting. In this context, the lack of a digital teaching and learning culture is mentioned: “I find that I have not really developed a digital culture, meaning how I deal with myself, how I teach and learn with breaks that I need, with the way to do it” (UFN3, Pos. 27). Online teaching is not only about knowing how to use technology, it also about pedagogy, technology and encouraging collaborative learning amongst students. Therefore, “online is not really transferring exactly what you are doing in the classroom to online, that it’s a totally different curriculum, different planning, [and] different infrastructure. And universities have to deal with it because most of the teachers do not know how to do it” (UFN2, Pos. 50).

Infrastructural Barriers

One of the major barriers that are holding back the move to online is the digital infrastructure and its functionality: "We have many companies, we have open source solutions, we have corporate solutions but they do not work properly, as has already been demonstrated in the global Covid[-19] situation" (UFN2, Pos. 79). Even though communication infrastructure might be good in developed countries, its potential for massive innovation in education has not been realised. This problem is further exacerbated in developing countries where there is a lack of information and communications technology (ICT), technological devices and connectivity to enable online delivery.

Resistance to Change

Since Covid-19 has forced lecturers to pivot to online environment to ensure that learning occurs, many of them may not be enthusiastic or motivated to change. However, change is inevitable and it is already happening. Change requires strong leadership which is seen as central in a quest to drive innovation and address structural changes that are needed to support the new business models. "[S]uppose that you don't have a leadership that believes in these kinds of technology, what's the point? This leadership will never try to implement or even design or think about a new plan because they're against it" (UFN1, Pos. 69-71). Furthermore, there is a motivational issue in terms of conditions and incentives for change because as most universities are public they need new education policies that will enable them to embrace change. It also requires a change of mindset to enable people try out things that they are not familiar with.

Students' Expectations and Engagement

Although some students are happy with going online, others may not want to change. Some experts observed that some students who do want to continue online may say: "I don't want to go to university every day. Why can't I have my material in a different way? Why do I need face-to-face meetings or face-to-face learning?" (UFN3, Pos. 23) and yet others may be content with face-to-face learning. Given these different views, the role of the university is to ensure that students have a good learning experience and this is measured according to the expectations of students and what they receive. It is therefore important that a future oriented university has to ask, "How can I make my students feel that in some measure they are not just passive users of what I offer them, they're not just there?" (UFN1, Pos. 54-55). This is one area that needs attention when we are rethinking the learning process.

3.2. Significant Conditions for Accessibility and Inclusivity in Higher Education

Bridging Digital Divide

There was a general consensus amongst experts that the issue of the digital divide is crucial because it manifests in different types of inequalities: one is on general access to internet and to devices including high speed internet access to carry out learning in an online environment. The other inequality is on ownership of equipment. Some students have mobile phones or smart phones while others have (several) computers, however, both equipment provide different types of experiences of learning. Even though students may have access to some of these devices, some students may not have healthy learning conducive environment at home to enable learning. There is also inequality in terms of the geographical location. Internet provision tends to be more stable and cost effective in institutions and urban centres than it is in rural and remote areas. In addition, digital divide can be pedagogical if the student does not have the necessary skills to learn in an online space. The example of MOOCs shows that there are a lot of "hidden prerequisites" (UFN1, Pos. 58) as MOOCs assume that students are equipped with an internet connection, English language skills as

well as digital skills. During Covid-19 crisis “a really huge problem of second level digital divide has emerged” (UFN1, Pos. 59). Covid-19 shows that technology can be a barrier when it systematically excludes students with disabilities, those who do not have digital skills and connection or digital device. All these inequalities need to be addressed before we think about the better use of technology.

Foster Social Justice

As the crisis situation brings online learning into every higher education institution, this also brings new chances and concepts for inclusion and accessibility. However, accessibility challenges are often perceived as structural problems concerning the design of the environment, the communication or the materials, but not as a problem related to the student. Relying too much on the possibilities of the students discriminates those who are less advantaged. Hence, it is important to take into account differences between students instead of seeing them as a homogeneous group. One expert states: “[A]ccess and inclusion is about social justice [...]. It’s to get rid of the traditional method of, ‘I am the instructor, I am the faculty and I teach you,’ but more like, ‘What do you need as a learner?’ customising the teaching process to the learner’s needs” (UFN1, Pos. 114). For the design of teaching and learning it means to include students’ different ways of learning and taking seriously what it means to work with their individual pathways. It changes the perspective from imparting knowledge to being skills- and experience-oriented and actively engaging the students.

Support Online and Autonomous Learning

The issue of supporting online and autonomous learning was raised by experts as one of the critical components of thinking about the university of the future. It is important that students are supported to achieve skills for self-directed learning as well as data literacy because “the tools we use for video conferencing are exclusive for many reasons because they are very complicated, partly, you need a big device to be seen there. So, what devices do we use but also, how do we diversify the ways of support we give students in their learning processes?” (UFN3, Pos. 89). To offer different modes of delivery and to provide students with different ways of learning requires autonomous learning. But this might be an issue especially for universities that are not used to deliver online as they do not know how to support students and faculty properly. Endowed higher education institutions may have capacity to carry on using online possibilities while less endowed institutions will go back to their old ways of teaching “printed materials [...] actually going back to correspondence learning” (UFN3, Pos. 104) if they are not supported to move online.

Diversify Higher Education

Higher education needs to become more diversified to ensure that everyone who wants to study gets admitted and can choose between different types of higher education institutions, for example, starting in a community college and continue studying at another university. This is possible if the policy environment allows such changes. In many countries there are regulations in terms of recognition of prior learning and collaboration which limit innovation in higher education practices in terms of developing international study or exchange programmes. In this instance, higher education institutions need to get more autonomy. If not, “there is a high risk that some classical quality assurance mechanisms will be standing alone and will sustain these developments, sometimes limiting accessibility, [and] sometimes other things” (UFN2, Pos. 76).

3.3. Visioning of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Post Covid-19

Social Challenges

To equip students with competencies to deal with the challenges of the 21st century and to promote social justice, sustainability is seen as major task of higher education: "Every graduate who leaves and has a potential to become a leader [...], must be preoccupied by these challenges. So, the big social challenges are not only those of government, not only those of health departments, they should be of every leader in every walk of life" (UFN3, Pos. 154-155). This period gives us a chance to "change this mentality and start to prepare people, like adaptive learners, people that will be able to pass different crises [...] because these things will happen in the future constantly" (UFN3, Pos. 166). Covid-19 shows that there is the need to equip students to deal with disruptive situations like this one. Hence, it is important to observe what students get out of the Covid-19 crisis and to reflect what it means for the curriculum in the future.

Alternative Ways of Teaching

Post Covid-19 teaching is going to be a "hybridisation of the system" (UFN3, Pos. 120) which means to always decide for teaching processes according to the context, the students, their knowledge and competencies. It will also be about removing the "one size fits all-model" (UFN1, Pos. 151). There will also be more digital solutions and new possibilities for synchronous learning which does not necessarily mean more online teaching, but "we will be more competent to make decisions when to move online instead of physical" (UFN2, Pos. 121). Lecturers will have to think about the importance of community amongst students and how to create it within online settings: "What do we mean by community? What's the minimum that students need in order to create that kind of synergy in relationships between them in the classroom? And how do we do it when we're in a sort of a normal setting versus how do we do it online?" (UFN2, Pos. 134). This challenges universities on how to deal with these new expectations from their students, "who have seen that it is possible to even get their degree via video conference call" (UFN1, Pos. 155-156). These new ways of teaching also require thinking about alternative assessments and evaluation. It is still a challenge to convince leadership to move to online exams despite the tremendous pressure accede to new demands. However, change can only happen if university leaders are willing "to change and [...] fight against those who do not want to change" (UFN1, Pos. 168).

Quality of Teaching and Learning

There was a consensus amongst experts that there is the need to think about what it is important in higher education for post Covid-19. Quality in higher education starts with the quality of teaching which is not very well dealt with in higher education. Good quality is not guaranteed by high tuition fees or ranking positions, but on "the way [we] assess the student in relation to whether they can do something out of the work that [have been given]" (UFN2, Pos. 187). What "Covid-19 has brought to the fore is that all of us can be able to see what the potential is out there and people will have an opportunity to have access to certain things" (UFN2, Pos. 148). Now the focus is on support structures for lecturers like centres for teaching and learning which has been more in the backyard before Covid-19. These days they are becoming much more important in ensuring the quality provision of teaching and learning in higher education.

New Normal Versus Normal

Some experts argue, that there will be a *new normal* which gives more attention and strategy to teaching and learning and therefore there is a need "to think differently about how you teach and what you do and how you take students in [...] treated more sensitively

in a way” (UFN3, Pos. 128-129). In general, there is a tension between turning towards new normal and reverting to traditional ways of doing things. Thus, “a sort of backlash” (UFN3, Pos. 25) could happen if the wish of going back to normal predominates the need of opening up for the new. However, some universities might lose students if they go back to normal without changing their ways of teaching, because the teaching and learning during Covid-19 changed “the perception of the possibilities that were unlocked to our learners” (UFN1, Pos. 154).

Political Will

Ground-breaking changes are guided by national policies as most higher education institutions are public and resourced from the public purse and therefore, they depend on political decisions. At national level, policymakers can lobby internet providers to drop their costs to ensure that students can access education material at low costs. “The old model was saying that the phone was going to be free when the internet was available [...]. Now, phones are mostly free when you have internet. Now we need internet for free. And we need bigger infrastructure across countries” (UFN1, Pos. 145). This can only be achieved if governments and policymakers view education as a public good that needs to be supported accordingly. Covid-19 might lead to a global economic crisis and in the future the focus will be less on education. Hence, especially *during* crisis it is seen as important to invest in education. To realise that “it requires political will and it requires sustained attention to making that shift in a sustainable way” (UFN3, Pos. 142).

4. Discussion

In addressing “Knowledge Production, Access and Governance” as well as “Citizenship and Participation” as outlined by the *International Commission on the Futures of Education* (2020), the discussion will be guided by these areas. The first one approaches knowledge “as a global common good. Education must take different voices into account [...] and the plurality and fluidity of knowledge – while also addressing persistent asymmetries.” (ibid., p. 4) whereas the second one seeks “to strengthen capacities for collective action and deepen commitments to democratic values” (ibid.).

The findings of the focus groups shone a spotlight on the challenges faced by higher education during Covid-19 pandemic and beyond. Covid-19 has not only disrupted our normal, it also challenged deep rooted views of what higher education is and how it needs to be delivered. More importantly, the role and the purpose of higher education has been questioned. By the end of this pandemic, what we consider normal may have radically changed. Contact based universities may have to use online to augment their face to face provision. Distance and open universities may have to harness the affordances of technologies to ensure that all their teaching including examination will be conducted remotely. The findings suggest that knowledge as a common good has to address the social justice mandate that deals with issues of accessibility, inclusivity and open education principles that ensures that no student is left behind. For many years, education has been commodified and seen as a preserve for those who can afford it, and now there is strong movement towards making education cost effective and accessible to as many people as possible. To achieve this goal, the university of the future must embrace open education principles of access, flexibility, lifelong learning, inclusivity, cost effective and student centeredness. The experts in these focus groups referred to all these principles in how the re-vision higher education in the future. The university of the future has to adopt blended learning approaches to ensure that education is accessible to students with a diversity of needs. The Covid-19 pandemic brought to the fore the gross inequalities in the higher

education sector and will be addressed by flexible personalisation of learning. The customisation of courses to an individual student may be increasingly significant in the future. Therefore, there is the need to use more flexible inclusive ways of ensuring that all students are reached – irrespective of their background, gender, race, disability, language and whether they are rural or urban or refugees or incarcerated people. The higher education of the future must strive to address the disparities created by the political, societal and economical inequalities.

While the future of higher education has been discussed in many circles, Covid-19 accelerated these dialogues by practically showing that technology has the most powerful impact on the education sector. Many education commentators view this period as an opportunity for higher education to reflect on its practices in order to transform itself to be more relevant to the future needs of the society. Transformation cannot happen if national government and regulatory bodies are not engaged in planning for the future of higher education. It is therefore important that there is a political will supported by policies geared towards transforming the education system. One of the main features to support participation and citizenship is to address the digital divide with regard to learning that has accelerated through Covid-19 and universities moving online. Closely connected to that is the need to give students their individual voices when it comes to customise teaching and to support students' individual learning pathways as an opportunity to foster social justice and participation. And finally, it is about the political will to support education as a public good by offering the internet and hence access to online learning for free.

5. Conclusion

The presented results which we related to the two addressed core areas identified by the *International Commission on the Futures of Education* (2020) show that disruptive situations like the current Covid-19 pandemic on the one hand accelerate developments like digitalisation of education and on the other hand that we need to get accustomed to deal with the unpredictable. Hence, what can we learn from this and what are pathways for higher education in the future? Besides the acknowledgment that moving learning into online provides a lot of opportunities, there is a high risk of excluding students and deepen the digital divide by these new modes of learning. Furthermore, based on the results and the discussion it can be argued that now, *during* the crisis it is necessary to lay the grounds for fundamental changes in (higher) education systems. This is precisely because there is a risk that after the crisis the focus will be more on economic issues than on education. Therefore, we have to be vigilant for future developments and need to set our reference points more in the future than in the today in order to question and re-vision the future of teaching and learning in higher education. Thus, we need to do much more evidence-based investigations and studies on future related issues and connect them with our visions of higher education.

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