



8th ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education (ARC8)

Outlook 2030: Inclusive and Diverse Higher Education in Asia and Europe

ARC8 EG1 Inclusive Learning and Teaching in a Digital World

Session 1 | Thursday, 17 December 2020

Memo

Presentation by Dr Nopraenu DHIRATHITI, Vice President for International Relations and Corporate Social Communication, Mahidol University, Thailand

Nopraenu was asked to make a 10-minute presentation focusing on the following 3 questions to provide food for thought for the expert group:

1. What is your take, how inclusive are learning and teaching in the digital world? what is the status quo? Do you have any numbers to show?
2. What potential risks do you foresee that could jeopardize greater inclusion in learning and teaching in a digital world in the next 10 years?
3. What opportunities and leverage points do you see to promote inclusion in learning and teaching in a digital world the next 10 years?

Nopraenu started her presentation by sharing insights to the **status quo** of **digital learning and teaching practices in Thailand**. She explained that the Higher Education Commission had promoted distance learning for 2-3 decades already, but not many institutions were interested in taking up the challenge. However, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a wake-up call, and all institutions were forced to act on distance learning.

Thailand shut-down schools and higher education institutions throughout the country between April-July 2020. Institutions had to change their way of interaction and classroom teaching in the matter of 2-3 days. According to the Office of National Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation Policy Council:

- 90% of all level of education got affected by the COVID-19;
- 30% of Thai students did not have privacy to study in their premises;
- 24.8% has been reported to have computer units to get access to the internet;
- 66% and 36% of the students do not own computers or smart phones, respectively;
- 67.7% of the household has been reported to get access to the internet;
- Those students who are classified as staying below the average income, 80% of them do not own smart phones/mobile units to get access on the internet;

According to UNICEF Thailand,

- **66% of the teachers/instructors** was reported to be **'moderately ready'** for online teaching and learning;
- **11.5%** was reported **'not ready'** for online teaching and learning;
- The majority of service providers/instructors reported that the key problems included:
 - The lack of trainings on course designs and digital literacy
 - IT infrastructure for online teaching and learning, including internet access

The key problems included the lack of training on course design and digital literacy of teaching staff, especially senior staff, who were not ready to migrate from the face-to-face learning and

teaching modality into digital learning and teaching platforms. Infrastructure for online teaching and learning including the internet access within higher education institution were also reported as one of the main concerns, because infrastructure varies from higher education institution to higher education institution.

Following this overview Nopraenue proceeded to share her thoughts on **potential risks that could jeopardise greater inclusion efforts in the next decade**. She shared the following points:

- Risks related to IT infrastructure for both students and institutions
 - 68 of the household has been reported to get access to the internet, and in terms of the overall coverage within the country there is not much of the difference between rural areas and also in the city;
 - However, there is a problem related to IT infrastructure, students lack computers, mobile phones and gadgets to access online learning services, 80% of those students who are classified as staying below the average income, do not own smartphones or mobile unit
 - Case study: at Mahidol University internet coverage is 100% WiFi + free sims policy has been launched for students immediately after the lockdown started
- Risks related to the skill upgrade of educators and professionals in both basic education and higher education + mindsets
 - institutions or even the national agency should have provided them more in terms of the course design pedagogy assessments

Regarding the **opportunities or leverage points that could lead to greater inclusion in digital learning and teaching in the next decade**, Nopraenue share the following thoughts with the expert group:

- “New normal” is the policy catch phrase for the government to promote lifelong learning as a national policy
 - Need to take this opportunity to connect teaching and learning and also inclusiveness with the overarching lifelong learning policy at the national level and at the institutional level. Thailand has established a lifelong learning policy, but before the COVID-19 pandemic there were no real initiatives in this filed.
 - The post-COVID-19 world offers now an opportunity to increase inclusion in online teaching and learning linked to the framework of lifelong learning policies.
- New normal is the keyword for instructors/students/other stakeholders to explore a new learning experience
 - Institutions need to consider whether they would adapt 100% online or hybrid or blended learning platforms, and how they can accommodate different forms of learning (e.g. internships, labs, devices, etc) on these platforms. There is no turning back to the usual traditional classroom teaching and learning, the rigid course designs and graduation / exam regulations demanding physical presence need to be revised.
 - Skills upgrade of teaching personnel, which would include e.g. digital literacy, new teaching and learning management, interactive, digital pedagogy, etc.
 - Involvement of other stakeholders in digital learning, e.g. families (how they are going to get involved), industries (how they are going to participate in blended apprenticeship etc.)

After Nopraeue's presentation, members of the expert group shared their inputs, reflections related to the status quo, risks and opportunities presented.

Comments on Status Quo:

- The situation is rather similar in Europe. In Romania for example a big part of the student body had difficulties in getting access to digital education. The systems were not prepared, and the solutions were quite unequal across Europe, some countries reacting better to the situation, while others could not provide the immediate tools necessary e.g. access to internet, digital infrastructure.
- It also has to be highlighted in the status quo how quality was affected in the shift to digital education, including adaptive curriculum, etc.
- In Thailand the infrastructure at the central level is pretty good but the reality is that many students don't have either the right equipment or a quiet space to work in their home environment. The situation in the UK for example is quite similar.
- The areas that we need to think about more are issues around teachers' skills, the digital literacy of the university teachers, and how it could be improved. The reality is that the teaching tools that we use are incredibly primitive compared to what we discuss in our classes. There is a big disconnect between what we say could be used and the tools and methodologies we can actually use. For example, the notion of hybrid learning has been undercurrent for decades as we know, but yet, we are not really clear how we can actually use it in practice, particularly when all the universities are shut because of the COVID19 pandemic.
- While it is true that young people have grown up with technologies, they are digital natives, we should not assume that they are capable of using the technologies in ways that we think are useful in order to support their learning.

Comments on Risks:

- One of the biggest risks of 100% digital learning is the absence of real human connections, which puts students at mental health risk. On top of online learning many of them are also restricted in their movement during the pandemic related lockdowns.
- COVID-19 has forced universities to take an extensive and invasive kind of approach to digital teaching and learning, many of the actions implemented overnight. If we think about digital learning and teaching under more normal circumstances, which we are going to get back to sooner or later, then the key issue will be how we train our teachers and how much we invest in teacher training programs. Hybrid form of teaching will be most probably something that we are going to see more compared to what we see today.
- Our institution, with a strong focus on computer sciences, has been highly prepared and ready to introduce fully digital learning when COVID-19 hit us. However, we have noticed, that the knowledge/performance of students dropped by 15% on average across different courses during the COVID semester. Therefore, effectiveness of digital teaching is something we need to strongly focus on in the future.

Comments on the Leverage Points:

- Enhancing quality of online learning has a lot of potential. We pivoted online education very rapidly, and some of the regions or some of the institutions may actually go further and

look into enhancing the quality. It would be interesting to see what kind of visions are out there in Asia and Europe (country of institutional level) how far are they going in terms of the quality of online education.

- Digital divide (lack of internet access or data) generates a trade-off between accessibility and engaged / enriched learning. For example, in Japan there is an expression “data diet”, meaning that students turn the video off when in online classes in order to spare on data traffic costs, or because they have no broad-band internet access, which compromises their participation and engagement in class. An opportunity could be for educators to identify new pedagogy addressing such issues.
- Another leverage point for inclusion could be enhancing digital extracurricular opportunities for students. Extracurricular offers opportunities for students to pursue learning at their own pace in their own way in a more flexible context. Digital technology could expand the reach of extracurricular opportunities allowing students to collaborate between campuses, possibilities for students to collaborate with their counterparts around the world and increase the scope of their activities and learn new perspectives.
- Digital education is a game changer. Now we are in a large-scale experiment, we are doing 100% everything online, so the game has already changed. We have an opportunity to set the new rules of the game, the main question is that which direction we want to go with it.
- We have started a project with students (<https://next-normal.eu/>) doing focus group discussions with students, and publishing podcasts on their view on self-study strategies, difficulties,
- A very important opportunity arises now, we must involve students in a new way into our education and to have them participate so that they're not just receiving education but that they are creating education. We have started another project on this topic called InclusiPHE(<https://www.esu-online.org/?project=inclusive-engagement-of-non-traditional-students-in-professional-higher-education-inclusiphe>)
- We see now actually in Germany that most of our students have access to higher education but the group of achiever students is different in traditional education and digital education. We need to learn how to engage students into their learning in a totally new way and that's about didactics and the learning model. We have to avoid being content-centric and think it is all right to build up resources to push content out digitally.
- When we think about the next normal, next novel, and what will it look like for our countries, there are probably three levels we can think about: (1) infrastructure level (2) technology we are using for teaching and learning (3) the opportunity level what will be the future model e.g. in digital learning between the sectors, through micro credentialing, recognition of prior learning.
- We need to find a way, a SMART way (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) to measure and describe mature inclusivity, inclusion through digital technology. In order to facilitate countries, institutions learning from each other and policy exchanges, we need to find the criteria, specific, measurable, tangible issues. This is also an opportunity.

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