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 2 | Friday, 29 January 2021

Memo

Presentation by Dr Victor NEGRESCU, Professor and Coordinator of Research Institutes, National University for Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Romania

Victor 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?

Victor began the presentation by thoroughly presenting facts and figures about the **Status Quo:**

- According to the OECD, there is a clear link between where people live, their socioeconomic status, their level of education and the employment they have (or do not have) and their level of digital proficiency.

- **Digital inclusion goes hand-in-hand with social inclusion; 43 % of Europeans lack basic digital skills** with significant disparities within and between Member States and based on socioeconomic status, age, income, gender, level of education and employment

    - For example, a manual labourer on the minimum wage and with no diplomas living in rural Romania is likely to have much less developed digital skills than a highly educated, high-earning lawyer living in Stockholm.

- The transition towards digital education illustrated the need for **further Member State cooperation** on the solutions and tools used and **funding for education has remained limited** despite the growing needs of the educational systems.

- The new context and the lack of adaptation of digital tools for **learners with special needs** has **widened the already existing gaps** and has sometimes led to major delays in their education and training.

- Within the European Union, a considerable **gender gap opens in terms of employment in the ICT sector** or in jobs requiring advanced digital skills, with **women making up only 21.5 per cent of workers in digital jobs.**

    - Romania example: in the context of the Covid-19 outbreak, close to 1 million children, representing 32% of pupils, did not have access to education for several months due to low access to basic infrastructure.

- Key EU documents: Digital Education Action Plan, European Education Area, Digital Europe, European Skills Agenda.

- Uneven access to distance learning, quality and well-being have been key concerns during 2020.

- In some Member States, **coverage** was almost universal (e.g., in Slovenia fewer than 2% of pupils could not be reached), in others a significant share of pupils was **left without education** (e.g., 48% of pupils in Italy)

- **Reasons for exclusion** included lack of devices, inadequate internet connections and/or difficult home situations, and many Member States distributed tablets and laptops to fill these gaps.

- According to the Education and Training Monitor 2020, the share of students attending **highly digitally equipped and connected schools** differs widely across Europe, is highest in Nordic countries, and ranges from 35% (ISCED 1) to 52% (ISCED 2) to 72% (ISCED 3)

- **Only 8% of pupils attend schools located in a village or a small city** which have access to a **high-speed Internet** above 100 Mbps.

- Romania example: 49% of Romanian homes subscribe to ultrafast (at least 100 Mbps) broadband, the fifth highest figure in the EU, however, digitisation of the economy lags behind, almost <u>one fifth of Romanians have never used the internet, and less than a third have at least basic digital skills.</u>

Victor proceeded to discuss **potential risks** that could jeopardise greater inclusion effort in the next decade. He summarised his thoughts around the following key points:

- **Lack of access leading to greater inequalities**
    - The crisis may have affected vulnerable learners most, including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those with special educational needs and in rural or remote areas.

- **Lack of skills for the emerging labour market**
    - 90 % of jobs expected to require some form of digital skills in the future.
    - Digital proficiency for lower-skilled adults, persons with disabilities, persons from vulnerable groups and older people - in 2018, just 4.3 % of low-skilled adults used any form of adult learning.

- Lack of proper investments in digital infrastructure, tools, and appropriate preparation of teachers.

- Lack of adapted methods, curricula and devices, especially secured devices with regard to cybersecurity.

Victor then proceeded to discuss **opportunities or leverage** points that could lead to greater inclusion in digital learning and teaching in the next decade.

- Leveraging **new educational devices and emerging technologies in education**, such as Artificial Intelligence, robotics, gamification, blockchain, augmented reality, online safe playgrounds.
    - The Institute for Global Digital Policies, at SNSPA, and E-Civis Association, in Bucharest, designed the first Romanian educational tablet, an adapted low-cost digital device with personalised educational content and secure digital learning apps.

- Putting our **know-how and resources** together and initiatives at EU level:

- Digital Education Hubs and co-creation
- Creation of an Online European University
- The development of a pan European educational platform
- Creation of the Teacher Academies or the implementation of the European Digital Skills Certificate (EDCS), supported by European institutions and stakeholders.

- Developing and implementing pilot projects in the field of digital education

- In terms of Policy making:

  - Allocating at least 10 % for education of the Recovery and Resilience Facility
  - Increase public spending for education in Member States' national budgets.
  - Education across policies
  - Scaling-up successful projects

After Victor's presentation, members of the expert group shared the following inputs and reflections related to the risks and opportunities presented.

Comments on Risks:

- Lack of access leads to the greater inequalities. This is a common concern around the world, not only in developing countries. The Covid situation makes us to adjust a lot in terms of getting digital technology into our learning and teaching experience. However, it is too much of an assumption that everybody has access to technology not only in terms of gadgets but in terms of infrastructure. This is a high risk at local, regional, and national level; therefore, it is a great risk that lack of access leads to greater inequality.

- Quality of investments is a high risk. Investments are spreading out, not necessarily coordinated at different levels (local, national level), and there are many options competing for scarce resources. A simple centralisation of resources into technology that is inclusive, accessible, and affordable would be a great potential. Choosing the right technology is key. Currently in Europe the only selection criteria is compliance with GDPR.

- Lack of adapted methods in terms of methods, curricula, devices – cannot be taken granted that everyone is ready to move forward with adaptation. It also greatly depends on the digital literacy levels.

- Regarding the lack of digital skills for emerging labour markets. HEIs are not in the same speed as the labour market, degrees do not provide emerging skills e.g., exponential technologies.

- Because of the speed in which things are changing, universities are not at the same speed. Many students finish their degrees and are at risk of unemployment and of not having right training to deal changing technologies.

Comments on Opportunities:

- The demand of the labour market is not being fulfilled and there are a lot of people that need and want training to have new skills.

- The Pan-European University and other Pan-European plans sound amazing and would have great impact.

- The European universities agenda was supported in a pilot by Erasmus, the idea is, in a nutshell, that traditional universities should work together in order to form a European

university where they actually provide the mutual degrees; that is the current achievement of the European policy.

- European policy might not move beyond this point, towards the Pan-European university, because education programs already receive support from EU taxpayers, and EU policy makers are concerned with how invasive they are, rather protect positions of current universities.

- The post-Covid Europe is unfortunately mostly decided that some percentage of money should go to green, some go to digital, they said that education is important but they never put any figure on it. Public spending on education has been slightly decreasing for the past decades.

- One way to make educational careers more attractive, is by using more digital examples and more advanced technology in order to attract people who would maybe end up as engineers or in some other careers. There is a real need for the teacher profession to be populated with people who are more open to change.

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