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UfM Webinar. The acceleration of digital transformation of higher education in the Mediterranean: threats and opportunities

Date: 19 November 2020

Duration: 90 minutes (10:00 – 11:30)

Context

Digital transformation of higher education was already a reality before the coronavirus crisis, but the current pandemic is accelerating the process. The measures of confinement forced universities at very different stages of digital transformation to find alternative ways to deliver education. This webinar will focus on how threats could be transformed into opportunities for the improvement of the quality and inclusiveness of teaching. In this crucial moment for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Mediterranean, all the involved actors and stakeholders need to be associated to the definition of strategies: students, teachers, higher education leaders and policymakers.

The UfM Roadmap, which was adopted in 2017 by the UfM Member States, affirms the willingness of the UfM to increase academic mobility opportunities in the Mediterranean region, a mission which has been conducted in the framework of the structured UfM Regional Policy Dialogue on student mobility. The current coronavirus crisis is limiting international student mobility, affecting the continuity of learning but also the perception students have of the value of studying abroad. Indeed, beyond the learning experience, students' value other benefits of international mobility, such as international exposure, social life on campus, access to a foreign job market and networking.

The lockdown entailed abrupt changes to long-established teaching methods inside universities, often lacking experience for implementing distance learning on such a massive scale, especially at a time of emergency. This has forced HEIs to conceive new ways of teaching and to deliver instructions; while assessment and examinations were also affected, causing disruption to students' learning progression. Suddenly, HEIs had to reinvent learning environments; they are now compelled to expand digitalisation in such a way that it complements student-teacher and student-student relationships, without affecting the irreplaceable value of face-to-face interaction. Though we find a wide disparity between universities regarding resources and expertise in this area, in many cases, HEIs in the Mediterranean area showed great flexibility and adapted rapidly to new evolving scenarios in order to deliver education to their students.

The acceleration in the use of online learning tools is impacting both teaching methods and curricula. Besides the change in the mode of learning, digital transformation is an opportunity to review curricula in such a way that students may be better prepared for an increasingly digital economy, in line with the Ministerial Declaration of the UfM on Employment and Labour Ministers (Cascais, April 2019): "skills development plays [an important role] to boost employability, competitiveness and growth and to address better the challenges of technological change and digitalization of the economy in the region".

The process of digital transformation involves the entire higher education systems and entails reassessing priorities concerning investments in infrastructures and human resources, within the HEIs themselves, but also at national, regional, and international levels. In the Mediterranean, policymakers strive to exploit the potential of technology as a means to improve the quality of higher education and to increase access to knowledge for all, but the use of technology is uneven from country to country, and from one institution to another within a country. Multilateral collaboration can counter digital divides, but is also required to define common technology norms and values, in a process in which multi-stakeholder participation is crucial.

Questions for reflection

- How to face the current crisis as an opportunity to reflect on the digital transformation of the teaching methods and on how technology can support quality and inclusive education?
- Does technology give the chance to undertake a shift towards more student-centred practices, thus creating the conditions for students to be able to influence their learning pathways?
- Which good practices on the design of online and blended courses can be shared and transferred?
- How does internationalisation at home and internationalisation of the curriculum can be promoted as pathways for growth and the modernisation of teaching?
- How can HEIs support digital transformation processes using internally available expertise? How can HEIs efficiently invest on teachers' professional development and acquisition of ICT skills?
- How is the crisis impacting academic procedures and internal regulations? Can it be used as a way to increase efficiency?
- How can international collaboration between HEIs foster the use of Open Educational Resources, which broaden the access to knowledge and soft skills?