European Students' Union (ESU)
Fighting for students' rights since 1982
www.esu-online.org
10, Rue de l'Industrie
1000 Brussels, Belgium

BM76 - Sofia

Statement on Digitalisation

Introduction

Digitalisation can be defined as a "transformation of all sectors of our economy, government and society based on the large-scale adoption of existing and emerging digital technologies." It is a trend in society which is also affecting education as expressed in the Paris communiqué, (2018): *"Digitalisation plays a role in all areas of society and we recognise its potential to transform how higher education is delivered and how people learn at different stages of their lives. We call on our higher education institutions to prepare their students and help them to act creatively in a digitalised environment. We will enable our education system to make better use of digital and blended education, with appropriate quality assurance, foresight in order to enhance lifelong and flexible learning, foster digital skills and competences, improve data analysis, educational research and remove regulatory obstacles to the provision of open and digital education. We call on the BFUG to take the issue of digitalisation forward in the next working period."*

Digitalisation of education is not a goal in itself but can be used as a mean to achieve other goals. If used in a good way, digitalisation has the potential to enhance the quality of education but if implemented in a wrong way, it can equally harm the education quality. Digital tools are the most useful when used in tandem with other learning methods – diversity in available learning methods is key. Having open access to information through digital tools should never replace the acquisition of fundamental knowledge by learners. For digitalisation to have a positive impact on education, the following aspects are essential to consider.

Digitalisation in the context of the Bologna Process

As the Bologna Process is a guiding movement in the context of development of higher education in Europe, we must acknowledge the need to also address digitalisation within this context. As stated above, the Paris Communique addressed digitalisation, blended learning and other important aspects as an area in need of being addressed in the coming years.

ESU firmly believes that digitalisation can be a means to make education more student-centered, internationalised, accessible, flexible and well-rounded. However, digitalisation must never be an excuse for reducing investments in education, public or private. Digitalisation can be a useful addition to already well-established methods of engaging with both formal and non-formal education and advance lifelong learning. Blended and digital learning has the potential of increasing participation in formal education, as well as creating tools to meet preconditions for accessing higher education. Therefore, the structured use of blended and digital learning can be in line with the fundamental values of the Bologna Process. However, this is not a given. Blended and digital learning can reach

those goals only if properly implemented, through involving qualified staff and students in the design of it.

Furthermore, digitalisation of education can be seen as a way to further implement Bologna tools present since the first years of the process. A good example of this is the mutual recognition of degrees and learning across Europe, as well as the advancement of Student-Centered Learning practices across the EHEA. It is important to state that digital and blended learning must also be subjected to the same standards as already existing learning and teaching methods, such as proper and learner-inclusive quality assurance of digital learning tools and methods.

Dos and don'ts of digitalisation strategies

Higher education institutions are increasingly creating strategies for how to implement digitalisation. But the purpose and quality of these strategies differ widely. ESU stresses that the impact of digitalisation on students' learning must be front and center of the strategies. Attention must be also paid to other skills required by the dawn of the digital era, and accounted for in digitalisation strategies. Students and staff need to acquire not only the technical skills to use digital tools but also other transversal and transdisciplinary skills and attitudes, such as data literacy, ethics etc. Sometimes, digitalisation is treated as a goal in itself, as a "trend" to keep up with for the sake of prestige, as a tool for saving money by cutting teachers' hours, or as an opportunity to generate revenue by creating for-profit online courses. These ways of viewing digitalisation are misguided and decrease education quality. Instead, the strategies should focus on how digitalisation can enhance learning, how students can be involved in developing the best use of digital tools in education, and how the necessary resources can be allocated for the staff hours needed for developing good digital learning content, and for investing in updated high-quality digital tools. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise that online learning is best supported by accepting the need to take public responsibility for funding the development of these programmes, especially to ensure access and retention. This needs to be complemented by broad access for students to digital library resources, ebooks and digital academic papers, as well as offering digital tools to students for administrative tasks and for contacts with the HEI administration. Digital learning should be a tool used to increase interaction and discussion and should offer better opportunities for students to actively participate in their education. Digital learning should also allow students to experiment in areas that it would be otherwise impossible for them to do. In addition, the use of digital tools such as simulation, virtual reality or digital learning games, should be taken into consideration as supplements for teaching.

The most important is that digital learning tools are always designed with the goal to enhance quality in education and with proper financing embedded in that design. Digitalisation must never be implemented with the goal of saving money since this will only have a negative effect on students' education, and will threaten the positive impact that digitalisation can have. The strategy must also include plans for evaluation of the consequences of the tools implemented, and here the student perspective is key.

Students' representatives must be included in every step of the way when implementing digitalisation in higher education. Furthermore, the digitalisation of teaching and learning has created a new group of students who participate in education mainly or fully online. It is important to ensure the full and equal participation of this student group in decision making.

Quality in online activities, teacher-student contact and building a strong learning community

As in any other types of educational activities, online education activities must have a clear purpose and the intended learning outcomes must be well communicated and understood by the students. Transparency considering who is responsible for each education element or examination is needed. Online or blended learning activities give an added challenge to teaching and learning because (part of) the teacher-student and student-student communication only takes place online. Lacking face-to-face communication makes it harder to build trusting relationships, built on mutual understanding which are important for learning. It furthermore makes it harder to build a sense of belonging to a welcoming and collaborative learning community. Universities should instead establish an environment in which face-to-face communication and digital learning complement each other to offer a modern and holistic approach towards higher education. Students with different habits (or backgrounds), for instance from non-academic families can build social connections and a sense of belonging to the institution to successfully fulfil their studies. Therefore the design of online activities must be carefully considered to stimulate dialogue so the online delivery of the activity does not decrease the contact students experience to the teacher and to each other. It must be kept in mind that there is a difference between different types of contact. A live-streamed lecture is not automatically as engaging as being physically in the room. A chat-forum about assignments, while in some cases is very helpful, does not give the same quality of communication as a face-to-face meeting with a teacher. However, these forms of communication can promote sustainability. In fact, many flights are made only for short meetings such as thesis defence or participation to one-day lectures with no interaction needed. Those trips with no or few interactions needed could precisely be replaced by online meetings and livestreams if the circumstances allow it. In all steps along the

way of designing a learning activity, the question must be asked: Does this choice stimulate active engagement and a committed relationship between students as well as between students and teacher? Effective use of digital tools requires teachers to be trained in how they can be used in a constructive way. If the necessary resources are not invested in training teachers on how to use digital tools – not only technically how they work but how to consider them into a high-quality course design – there is a high risk of digitalisation resulting in decreasing education quality, even when the opposite is the intention.

Furthermore, to create a quality education environment it is imperative that there are systems of support built around the teaching and learning space itself. Therefore, it is important that all aspects of provision are mapped out during programme design, including support and advisory services, policies and procedures, course resources, departmental initiatives, staff capacity, and academic provision. Supports normally available to students in a face-to-face on-campus environment should be replicated or reformed for online or blended learning, such as library resources, feedback mechanisms, and mental health resources.

Quality assurance of MOOCs and other e-learning activities

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are gradually recognised by formal education providers who want to better respond to the needs of their learners. However, in most cases, MOOCs are currently not at the quality level necessary to substitute actual higher education. MOOCs can take a step in that direction if the points and criteria described below are implemented and MOOCs live up to them. If developed keeping a universal design in mind, they can be freely available to all students regardless of their accessibility requirements. However, MOOCs should not be seen as a way to replace the availability of traditional contact learning, or for cost-cutting - on the contrary, implementation of high-quality e-learning or blended learning requires investment. As for traditional contact learning activities, Quality Assurance (QA) processes should be commonly and genuinely defined for MOOCs provision. Currently, when assessing quality of education at higher education institutions, the focus is on traditional contact learning activities, while MOOCs or other digital parts of the education provision escape attention. The panellists performing QA activities must be trained to be able to properly ensure and enhance the quality of education activities taking place online. Another challenge hindering quality assurance and enhancement of MOOCs is that many providers are private companies and not higher education institutions, and therefore do not see themselves as needing to be a part of the QA system. The standards and guidelines used by higher education institutions to evaluate their courses might not be universally applicable to MOOCs and other Online Education Resources (OER), but a great many principles, such as Student Centred Learning (SCL),

on-going monitoring of courses, and closed feedback loops are essential regardless of the type of education activity. Student participation in the development and quality enhancement of their courses is key, and the involvement must go beyond just providing feedback at the end of an online course. Special attention must be given to collecting feedback from those participants who did not complete the online activity they enrolled in, as they have valuable insights about how the activities could be changed to improve completion rates. ESU believes that a common initiative should be developed within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for ensuring and enhancing the quality of this type of education provision, and the recognition of the achieved learning outcomes. Quality should be a priority in the design, monitoring and evaluation of any e-learning activities. Whereas MOOCs aim to reach large numbers of people by providing access to content primarily in an asynchronous mode, another form of e-learning is Virtual Exchange, which focuses on structured and facilitated learning programmes that connect people to people for the explicit purpose of intercultural dialogue and transversal skills building. ESU encourages the continued investigation by the European Union in such forms of virtual international activities, notably through Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange.

Ethical use of student data and learning analytics

Students are the owners of their own data. Giving up the right to control the use of your data, or giving up your right to privacy, should never be a prerequisite for participating in educational activities or exams. When digital tools are used in education, measures should always be in place to ensure the privacy and digital security of students, using the principles of “privacy by design”. Collection of student data for the purpose of learning analytics may open doors for improvements in the quality and inclusivity of education. This can be done by moving away from “one size fits all’’ solutions and using data about the students’ activities and performance to better guide them in their education. However, the collection of student data for learning analytics is bringing a high demand for data security, especially imagining student data for many individuals being collected at a certain point makes this data incredibly vulnerable. Increasing assessment due to data collected learning analytics bears a big risk in influencing the learning behaviour of students and increases the risk of pressure to perform and it may lead to increased pressure tackling students mental health. This can be done by moving away from “one size fits all” solutions and using data about the students’ activities and performance to better guide them in their education. However, students should be given the option to actively accept their data being used for learning analytics, and the data should only be used in ways which the students have given fully informed and withdrawable consent to. If the use of the data changes over time, the students should be asked for consent again to always be informed what their data is being used for, and the data should never be shared with third parties

without full knowledge and explicit consent of the student. Learning analytics should never be used to close any doors for the students - for example by denying them access to courses or exams based on their data. Data about students' behaviour on online learning platforms may be used for evaluating and improving the effectiveness of study activities but must not be used for student assessment. Students should be closely involved in every step of the design and application of learning analytics systems. Students and teachers should be trained in understanding how the learning analytics systems work, to ensure proper use of the tools, and build trust. Learning analytics should never substitute nor diminish student representatives. The continuous need for data collection of learning analytics should never bias curriculum design through taking focus away from the student-centred perspective to a perspective solely regarding figures and data. Students are different and learn in different ways, therefore it is central that learning analytics allows diversity of methods in the learning system. Data about whether students identify with groups that are underrepresented or face specific challenges in education may be used to improve the learning experience for these students but it is important that the data is anonymised and aggregated so the individual student cannot be identified.

Inclusion

As digitalisation should aim to increase quality in education, it should also be used as a tool to enhance the social dimension and make education accessible for people of all backgrounds. It is not given that digitalisation can be used as a tool when working with social dimensions. It requires proper implementation and financing in order to have the potential to contribute positively to making study environments more inclusive, as well as create more objective and fair access and recognition procedures, among others.

Students with special needs or learning disabilities should be provided with special and adjusted materials, which would allow them to successfully continue and finish their education process. Having accessible study materials, such as digital library resources, ebooks and digital academic papers provided by the university, can also encourage those students to engage in mobility programs, which would support the idea of having a diverse student population participating in mobility programmes. ESU believes that by providing new ways of learning, we are reaching our overall aim of creating a higher education, which is more accessible and in which the student population reflects the diversity of society.

While, as elaborated before, digitalisation can aid to improve the social dimension of higher education, there are a number of risk factors which must be taken into consideration. Primary among

these is the need to ensure that academic staff are properly trained in the field. Without sufficient training on inclusion of a diverse student population or about the desired outcomes of such advancements, digitalisation advancements can end up leaving disadvantaged students behind.

ESU stresses the importance of having a universal design for up to date and accessible tools, which do not require students to invest in new technologies on their own expenses in order to access them or in order to take part in the activities requiring their usage. Furthermore, ESU also emphasises the need to not overlook access to basic tools, such as access to the internet or technological devices. While these are tools which are taken for granted by many students, there are still disadvantaged groups that struggle to obtain such access, and this struggle should never be overlooked.

Intellectual Property

Protected by law, Intellectual Property (IP) is defined by the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) as the creation of the mind, such as inventions; literary and artistic works; designs; and symbols, names and images used in commerce.
IP is a category of property including copyright, patents, trademarks, industrial designs and geographical indications. This legal term falls under two perspectives: content produced and content referenced.

Considering that students must ensure that all content used for work is properly referenced taking into account its original context/meaning, the true controversy lies in students ownership of their intellectual property. Work produced by the students shouldn't be seen as a source of income for universities. IP was created to foster content production, and this scope must never be broken nor violated. Students should have the final word when it comes to deciding whether to market their work or not. Projects, ideas and concepts should not be accepted for the purpose of making a profit out of it. If the decision taken is to commercialise it, the profits should be fairly distributed between the author and the university.