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REINVENTING UNIVERSITY.

THE DIGITAL CHALLENGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Edited by

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1. GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACADEMIC BODIES WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE ERASMUS+ PROJECT ECOLHE¹

by Luca Torchia*

1. *E-learning in the European Higher Education Area. Empowering Competences for Onlife Learning in Higher Education*

ECOLHE (E-learning in the European Higher Education Area) is a project co-financed by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union (project n. 2020-1-IT02-KA203-079176) in the field of KA203 - Strategic Partnerships for higher education. It started on 1st September 2020 and ended on 31 August 2023². The project involved partners from different countries: the Digital Technologies Education & Society (DiTES) research centre, Link Campus University, the Link Campus Foundation, the University of Roma Tre (Italy), the University of Patras (Greece), the University of Applied Sciences “Bachelor” (Finland), the University of Cork (Ireland), the University Oberta de Catalunya (Spain) and the EAEC (European Association for Erasmus Coordinators) network.

¹ For more information about the project see Capogna S. *et. al.* 2023/a; 2023/b.

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Since its beginning, the aim of the project was to examine how the idea of a European E-learning Area (within the wider framework of the Bologna Process³) has been implemented at the national level by academic institutions. ECOLHE was conceived as an *action research* project (Lewin, 1946) aimed at creating the best conditions for exchanging good practices at the European level and promoting digital culture and skills in the broad field of Higher Education. The research adopted a mixed methods approach (Amaturo & Punziano, 2016) by the realisation of six case studies (two in Italy and one each in Spain, Greece, Ireland and Finland) through a comparative perspective (Yin, 2003).

The project has been developed by realising 5 *Intellectual Outputs* (IOs) and one *staff training* action. Starting from a research activity on the changes introduced by the digital revolution in the universities involved in the project, ECOLHE has implemented:

- The realization of a training course for teachers and tutors aimed at improving online teaching skills in the logic of Lifelong Learning (LLL), based on the suggestions made by the High-Level Group on the Modernization in HE (HLGMHE, 2013; 2014).
- The co-design of new training paths through the involvement of students and external stakeholders.
- The drafting of a Final Report aimed at collecting “recommendations” and useful suggestions for developing good academic governance.

³ Starting from the Bologna Declaration (1999), European countries initiated a development program devoted to building a European HE Area to face (digital) challenges by adopting a shared Quality Assurance model capable of running the enhancement of Life Long Learning (LLL) through ICTs (ENQA, 2009).

2. *Recommendation and Guidelines for Academic Bodies*

The general aim of the action research work was to provide useful elements of analysis and understanding of the challenges that the digital transition imposes on the university, conceived as a complex organization. The most important element on which it seems appropriate to reflect concerns the strategic role of Higher Education institutions in preparing people for future challenges and safeguarding values such as inclusion, innovation and Lifelong Learning. What emerged from the 6 case studies⁴ suggests the need to take an active and design approach to innovation “imposed” by the digital revolution. In essence, it is necessary to overcome the mere reactive and adaptive perspective to the stimuli coming from external changes. At the same time, it is also important to critically analyze the impact of digital technology on the organizational and educational transformation of the higher education system. Adopting too simplistic and/or deterministic views exposes the risk of not considering (or sometimes uncritically assessing) the relevance of the digital infrastructure. This would prevent the necessary technical, organizational, psycho-pedagogical and communicative support. The availability of the technological infrastructure is not per se enough to guarantee the correct use of learning and knowledge technologies among colleagues, learners, and researchers (Capogna *et al.*, 2020).

In this respect, comparative research between the different case studies was carried out during the first phase of the ECOLHE project (Capogna *et al.*, 2021; 2023). A questionnaire was distributed among students from various institutions to reconstruct how the different universities developed their strategic approaches to digitization within the supranational and national

⁴ The 6 case studies correspond to the institutions of the different project partners: n. 1 in Spain, Greece, Finland and Ireland; n. 2 in Italy.

ties framework. The analysis allowed us to extract six fundamental themes to consider if you want to look at digital innovation processes in complex organizations such as universities:

1. The impact of digital innovation.
2. Digital innovation strategies.
3. The digital learning process.
4. The digital innovation process.
5. The impact of the pandemic on the teaching-learning experience.
6. International Quality standards.

These factors are what, according to the adopted perspective, can give an account of the level of “digital maturity” of students in an institution and, consequently, of the institution itself.

Nowadays, the need to rethink and rebuild a new teaching and learning model adapted to the new “onlife” daily routine determined by digital technologies is clear. However, such transformations should always be accompanied by studies and research to understand the psycho-social and organizational effects produced by them. These actions seem even more necessary considering the push the pandemic emergency has given to the digital transition. The work within the ECOLHE project has highlighted the need to study appropriate quality standards that can consider the human and relational dimension, which is the heart of every learning and innovation process. By considering this, thinking and designing training processes and models for incoming and serving teachers in Higher Education can enable them to improve their digital culture and skills. As noted in the research carried out during the project’s first phase, the “digital maturity” of organizations and subjects turned out to be a complex concept. It is characterized by many facets, which do not refer only

to the hard dimensions connected with the field “digital”. Understanding the multiplicity of variables involved in the processes of transformation in progress is necessary to explore such a complex and ever-changing phenomenon in depth.

Today, more than ever, academic bodies are called to assume a strategic role in interpreting and defining a new model of digital university. The goal is to pursue critical and reflective innovation paths and plan development strategies in adopting digital tools and resources to rethink Higher Education systems.

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