HOW WILL THE UNIVERSITY CHANGE WITH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC? AN ITALIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The shock of the closure to contain the Covid-19 pandemic has forced universities all over the world to make rapid changes to their teaching and research; but also changed the social and economic role in the area where the university is located. In fact, after an initial period of disorientation and more than a year of distance learning, the students and teachers began to appreciate the "new university" made up of different times and places; a more inclusive university. It is therefore necessary to emphasise the need to focus all attention on managing this change and designing the future of the university worldwide; a reflection that is part of a broader context of studies, research and reflections undertaken at academic and institutional level to identify the new possible university scenarios in which to invest in order not to find oneself disoriented in a new world made up of different teaching methods, new ways of providing services to students, new relationships between research and teaching and also new administrative processes. These aspects will be the most important part of the orientation of young people and adults in choosing the university where to study.

KEYWORDS: Covid-19; university, quality assurance; post-pandemic, lifelong learning.

INTRODUCTION

The shock that the whole of society is still experiencing as a result of the restrictions on the containment of the Covid-19 pandemic has changed everyone's life forever, including the university system, which has found itself obliged to use telematics approach; a management system that it has always wanted to avoid because it did not consider it to be of high quality. It has had to adapt the way in which it trains students in all aspects: online lectures, the services integrated with them, the way in which research is carried out and the dissemination of its results (web-conferencing), but also the ways of maintaining relations with the territory and contributing to its development. Each teacher was obliged to carry out his or her lessons from home, while all the students, who were also at home, were at the other end of the computer; often all the students were connected, even those who previously would not have attended the courses, since they were shut away at home.

Students, especially those who regularly attended classes, without the university found themselves without their daily living environment, their social relationships and their autonomy from their families. Finally, the geographical area around the university lost its social role and paid for the halt in all forms of economic development. It is precisely the university area that has still not been able to resume its activities on a regular basis, since even if the bookshops, stationery shops, copy shops, canteens, bars, restaurants, pubs, B&Bs, room rentals, etc., have reopened, they are still not working. Without students and teachers do not work.

Everyone's attention must now be focused on identifying the best way of restoring the university's role: as a formal education for the university course; as a non-formal place because it is a source of learning for young students and of comparison between teachers; as an informal place because the university allows students from different places and cultures to meet; as a common good because it enables economic development.

Even after the end of the emergency, the university will no longer be the same in terms of both teaching and research; the system devised for the emergency is appreciated by students and their families, and not only by those with special educational needs (workers, adults, the off-site, the disabled, etc.); also by teachers, especially those who live far from the seat. The first reflections and research point to an appreciation by all of the lessons held at home (the number of students attending courses has increased), of the exams taken at a distance (grades have increased and improved), of the student reception, as well as of the administrative procedures, from matriculation to graduation, etc., all of which have been appreciated by students.

Faced with the restart of activities in attendance, each university, particularly the smaller ones, is faced with the need to define new strategic guidelines to try to resume its activities without suffering those of other universities, particularly the more famous ones. It is necessary to make choices that will outline the future development of the university and its reference territory; choices that will identify the ability to transform what has been done in an emergency into an opportunity for consolidation, development or even just defence, in order to avoid being crushed because decisions have not been taken.

TOWARDS A NEW EDUCATION FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Compared to the common appreciation of distance learning on the part of the students and a little bit also of the teachers, what emerged as a limitation was precisely the way in which the lessons were carried out; in fact it was defined as a lesson given in the classroom and not different; still too much based on traditional teaching models, considered inadequate to the current needs of learning no longer only of knowledge but on the ability to do, ability to use knowledge and skills; what was said was that the teacher was unfamiliar with the platforms and above all not very capable of using them both in live activities and in those to be carried out independently.

Distance learning has also been available in Italy for many years. As early as 1990, the reform of university provided for financial support for state universities wishing to set up distance learning activities; immediately afterwards, in 1991, with the law on the right to university studies made it possible to promote courses for student workers and distance learning. This possibility continued until 2003, when a ministerial decree defined the criteria and accreditation of distance learning courses at state and non-state universities. The intention of the government was to allow all universities to provide access to university for everyone: adults, workers, the sick, the weak, the disabled, etc. A possibility of life-long learning exploited mainly by telematic universities, which have thus identified their target users.

Despite the fact that it has been possible to give university lectures at a distance for over thirty years in Italy, the pandemic has highlighted the delay in Italian university lecturers' ability to give lectures at a distance; what has, in fact, happened is the frontal lecture through a computer and an internet network that is not always adequate; all introduced by "Good morning, can you hear me? I'm sorry, but today the Internet is worse than usual...".

However, it must be acknowledged that a new 'revolution' has begun in the Italian university; however, this will only bring about real change if there is real investment in teachers, who must be kept up to date on teaching, assessment and quality assurance. Without training there will be another untapped opportunity to bring the university closer to those who cannot attend today. For the university, this would be a way of resuming its role as a driving force for territorial development, a role that has always characterised it and which in the past has led to the establishment of many universities or the opening of local branches to promote the socio-economic development of a given area.

FOR A NEW UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

As in other social contexts, the sudden obligation to suspend the university activities in presence caused a general disorientation, more in the scholars than in the administrative staff, especially because many had never had any experience of distance learning; probably also for this reason the method adopted to carry out the lesson was that of replicating what was usually done in the classroom: a live lesson; this however could not be integrated by body language and interaction with the class group, transforming it in fact into a transmission of knowledge by voice and with correlated images, almost like a recorded lesson.

Today, after several months of experience acquired in the field, of informal (by asking the other colleges) and non-formal (with moments of exchange of practices organised by the universities themselves) training, activities that can be called blendend learning are starting to take place: live lessons integrated with asynchronous activities on the "platforms" that already exist but are only used to give the materials to the students and with exams organised in a different way from the traditional computer-based interview.

Some lecturers, on the other hand, were able to combine lectures to students with their own research activities, turning the research webinars into a valuable resource for students; previously, students did not participate in in-depth disciplinary initiatives by lecturers and experts from other universities. The work pathway experiences are also becoming an opportunity for students that they did not have before; "smart-working" placements have actually increased the opportunities to choose even abroad, especially for students with special needs including work.

Student services have changed rapidly because the pandemic has made it possible to speed up the change to digitalisation, which was not done for cultural reasons or economic strategy; in fact, enrolment, relations with the teaching and student secretariat, delivery of forms, etc. now take place online and assistance is provided by telephone. This is changing relations between students and the university, but the educational value of these moments is being lost: aggregation, mutual aid, personal growth, learning the rules, problem solving, etc.

On the other hand, the university lecturer was used to working away from the university and this was nothing new; in fact, preparing lessons, correcting exams, responding to students' requests, studying, carrying out one's own research are activities that have always been carried out away from university. The problem arises with the relationships between the schoolars; in fact every informal relationship is being cancelled and every moment of contact with the administrative staff and the students is being lost; this is distancing them from feeling part of a university community.

It is clear from initial research that it is the student who has suffered the greatest shock from the suspension of university life; in fact, in the belief that university students, as adults, had a greater capacity for adaptation than those at other levels of education, priority was given to restoring and/or maintaining the 'quality' of the university, neglecting its educational role and that of social and economic development.

A number international research (UNESCO 2020) highlight the fact that distance learning, while on the one hand it has brought university students (out-of-towners, workers, the disabled, etc.) closer to a world that for various reasons they could not attend, on the other hand for regular students it has confirmed the loss of the added value of life in classrooms, common spaces and non-university spaces.

Of great importance is what the students think: there are very few in favour of an exclusively online teaching method and a higher percentage of them attending the lessons, precisely because of the removal of time and geographical barriers; the others are divided between a return to a completely face-to-face mode and a "mixed teaching". It seems that this will be the mode used in the future.

Here too, however, a plan for the development of digital and technological infrastructures can never be complete without a parallel plan to train and update teachers in 'blended teaching': an alternation of self-study on recommended texts, teaching materials

specially designed for the acquisition of the basic knowledge needed for in-depth studies, discussions, and exercises necessary for the acquisition of the skills to be carried out in the university classroom.

A learning model that, moreover, would make it impossible to come close to those used by telematic universities, which, on the other hand, prefer teaching methods that do not involve synchronous activities. Beyond institutional choices, therefore, the transformation of the efforts made so far to manage the emergency into an opportunity for the university's development is in the hands of university lecturers; only through innovative and inclusive teaching can the university return to being the centre of development in the area, relying, for example, on an increase in the attendance of all students at the university at different times and in different ways than before.

CONCLUSIONS

While everyone is convinced that the Covid-19 pandemic is also transforming the university, the discussion by both the academy and the institutions on how it is transforming itself is still in its infancy. Indeed, it is uncertain what post-pandemic model will be adopted for the design of teaching and student services but also for the research of each faculty member and department. It is still uncertain what new role the university will play in the training of students as workers but also as citizens and above all in the development of the reference territory; students, lecturers and all the university staff have changed their habits and lifestyles towards distance activities.

Some new scenarios can be seen in the new university: administrative services for students (enrolment, communication with secretariats or teaching committees, library services, etc.) and teaching services (student reception, tutoring, thesis assistance, placement, etc.) will also remain online; infrastructures (covid-free equipped classrooms, common areas, enhanced internet) and teaching services (virtual environments for both synchronous and especially asynchronous lessons, etc.) have been transformed, thanks also to some ministerial funding. What we still do not see, at least in Italy, is a different didactic organisation of lessons, and this is mainly due to the resistance of many teachers who find it hard to accept that lessons are conducted differently from the way they have always been done.

On the whole, however, the university's solid organisational response and the formation of a "telematics" culture among professors and administrative staff has confirmed that the removal of time barriers (the time it takes to get to the university, the times of student receptions or of the opening of administrative offices, etc.) and space barriers (travel to the university, home and work, etc.), while on the one hand improving the university's ability to be inclusive, is on the other hand undermining the ability of those who were unable to experience the university.) and spatial barriers (travel to the university, home and work, etc.) have on the one hand improved the inclusive capacity of those who could not experience the university, but on the other they are jeopardising the roles of university campuses: informal educational agency for students and promoter of socio-economic development for the non-university territory.

In any case, the only direction that the universities seem to be maintaining is that of on-line teaching, albeit with different configurations, from the "dual" one, which would allow those who cannot be present to attend lectures at the university to do so (aware of the difficulty of teaching two classes at the same time), to the "mixed" and unique one for everyone (blended learning); this provides for the training process to be carried out partly on-line (but not in live) and partly in presence (with in live classes).

This new way of teaching would in any case be an inclusive university policy because it would enable everyone (adults, workers, the disabled, etc.) to attend university, thereby also increasing the number of students graduating, which is a major problem in Italy. If this leads the Italian university towards the prospect of lifelong learning and an increase in the

population continuing its studies, it will on the other hand bring about a change in the way of choosing the university and the city in which to continue their studies; the choice of university is in fact also forced by the ability of a family to invest in human capital and not only for the tuition fee; in fact, with mixed teaching the way of studying will change (off-site or as a commuter); in fact, it will not be compulsory to attend lessons every day on the university campus.

There is no doubt that this will cause the university to lose its role as social capital for training in aspects of daily life, in autonomy of choice, in the management of relations between peers and with adults; there is a risk that it will no longer be able to promote the socio-economic development of an area. The risk is great.

The hope is that the post-pandemic reorganisation of universities will reduce the enrolment gap between them and thus be able to rebalance their distribution among several universities so that they can maintain their role as a common good for the territory they serve.

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