

BeEUTOPIAN Student Conference 2020/2021

Conference Report and Recommendations

Introduction

BeEUTOPIAN is the annual international EUTOPIA student-led conference. It is organised for and by EUTOPIA's students. The BeEUTOPIAN conference assumes the task of presenting and debating the current position and potential scenarios concerning a key social-scientific issue.

The 2020/2021 iteration of the BeEUTOPIAN conference was devised and delivered by an organising team of 13 students (2 from each EUTOPIA partner plus a representative from the EUTOPIA Student Council). They led a superb three-day virtual conference on the theme: *'The impact of Covid-19 on International Education'*. Over 100 students and staff registered for the sessions. Speakers included students, academic staff, and senior representatives from the EUTOPIA alliance universities, and external stakeholders.

This Conference Report consists of two parts. Part A provides a summary of each day of the Conference and contains a series of Recommendations developed during and after the event in response to the panel discussions. These will be submitted to each university Education Committee and to EUTOPIA's Advisory Board and made publicly available on the EUTOPIA website. Part B is an internal document that evaluates the process of organising the Conference to help improve the running and delivery of the event in the future. Part B will not be made publicly available.

Part A: Conference Summary and Recommendations

The first day of the Conference provided an opportunity to assess how digitalisation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic created a new experiential concept of teaching and learning, and the impact this had on student mental health. Discussion focussed on how students and lecturers adapted to digital forms of learning, teaching and assessment, and ways in which this new paradigm has become part the university experience. Further panels during day one focussed on the impact to student mental health and wellbeing. Here, the conference looked at different forms of support that were, or might have been, available during the height of the pandemic.

Recommendation:

- **In crisis situations, minimise uncertainty and confusion by communicating regularly with students through one primary communication channel.**

The Conference recognised that universities were operating in a period of high-level of uncertainty as national and regional guidance and regulation changed frequently as Covid spread across the world in 2019. However, students experienced feelings of abandonment, uncertainty, and fear, particularly in the early days of the pandemic, when even Student Unions

found it difficult to get response from universities. A lack of direct, clear communication from universities gave a feeling that “the university doesn’t care about us”. More messages such as “we’re all in this together” or “we’re awaiting further guidance and will contact you again soon” would have been appreciated.

Day two of the conference considered the broader costs of Covid-19 for students. Sessions discussed the ways in which the pandemic caused an additional strain on equal access to education by removing employing opportunities for students. Specific cases were investigated, including the support available for international students and the lack of face-to-face internships during the period and the difficulties this causes when students seek to enter the labour market.

Recommendations:

- **Student welfare should be considered holistically and areas of good practice in terms of wellbeing support should be shared**

Covid-19 resulted in the cancellation of in-person teaching, the curtailment of student exchanges, loss of part-time work and, in some cases, confinement to bedrooms. The pandemic was an exceptional event, but it demonstrated the need to consider student welfare holistically. Moving teaching online isn’t sufficient, universities should consider ways to address all the impacts raised above, with particular attention paid to international students and vulnerable groups.

However, many areas of good practice were identified in terms of student welfare provision. The Conference reflected positively on group counselling sessions where students could share their experiences. One university made phone calls to every student to check on their wellbeing and to refer them to support services if needed. These positive examples should be shared among the EUTOPIA partners by creating a EUTOPIA community of welfare professionals.

- **Additional forms of financial support should be available to students disadvantaged by the Covid-19 pandemic**

Many students fund their time at university through part-time work alongside their studies. Sectors that employ large numbers of students, such as hospitality, were severely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and as such students lost a valuable source of income. This created real hardships, particularly for those students who cannot rely on financial support from parents or guardians. More money should be available to students through hardship funds, particularly if universities have been able to make savings during the pandemic.

- **EUTOPIA universities should consider ways to give students a physical graduation experience to those who graduated during the pandemic**

Students who graduated during Covid-19 missed out on a very significant life experience, at a physical graduation ceremony. Some students received their diplomas by post, which made them feel neglected. Universities should investigate ways to re-create the graduation experience for these students and their families and friends.

Day three focussed on the future, putting the spotlight on how to connect and engage various stakeholders to find solutions to the challenges posed during the first two days. Sessions discussed lessons that can be learned from the shift to digital learning, and the successes that can be built upon; evaluated pedagogical tools and the expansion of blended learning; and debated ways to closure of any educational gaps and address student mental health and wellbeing concerns exacerbated by the pandemic.

Recommendation:

- **Accelerated digitalisation could be transformational in making the EUTOPIA universities more open, and result in free education for all**

Universities, lecturers, and particularly students have adapted quickly to online forms of communication and remote learning. Hybrid learning, and particularly moving lectures online, offers the opportunity for students from different disciplines, or even different universities, to take classes in a way that would not have been previously possible. This has the potential for students, including lifelong learners, to experience a range of pedagogical methods, (inter)disciplinary expertise and to gain international and intercultural experiences outside of traditional mobility frameworks. EUTOPIA should seize this opportunity to open the doors of our universities wider and not to close them again. A searchable, virtual catalogue of EUTOPIA lectures or classes on a particular topic that would be accessible to all students of the alliance would push this approach further.

BeEUTOPIAn Student Organising Team
4th November 2021