WP6.2.3 Student 'BeEUTOPIAn!' conference reports and recommendations

Table of contents

1. BeEUTOPIAn Student Conference 2020/2021

1.1. Conference Report and Recommendations

1.1.1. 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.

1.1.2. 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.

2. *BeEUTOPIAn Student Organising Team (4th November 2021)*
BeEUTOPIAn Student Conference 2021/2022

2.1. Conference Report and Recommendations

2.1.1. Introduction

The BeEUTOPIAn Student-led Conference again proves to be a remarkable experience!

Under the motto "**The New Possible, At Hand**", the 2022 Be EUTOPIAn Student-led Conference aimed to reclaim a space for discussion, exchange of knowledge, and networking for students of EUTOPIA, after two years of hardships due to COVID. It did exactly that, and more.

The conference was structured in two days following different themes. The **first day** focused on **youth mental health** and the sustained impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on emotional vitality amongst young people, and took some time discussing how Artificial Intelligence can be both a risk and an opportunity when searching for human affection in the post-pandemic era. This day welcomed **David Gosar (PhD and PsyD at University of Ljubljana)** and **Oliver Mairesse (associate professor at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the VUB)** as guest speakers.

The **second day** focused on **student engagement** in our time, and on how **student associations** have been changed by the pandemic. The day was full of interventions by engaged students and representatives making a positive impact across the EUTOPIA Alliance, from **Aïssatou Jalloh** who presented the **"Decolonize VUB" initiative** to **Bernat Paya and Carlota Ropero,** the **EUTOPIA Student Representative** and **Student Career Ambassador from the UPF**. The day was topped off by a **workshop** where students formed teams to come up with creative, student-grown solutions to global problems like **student poverty** and **unpaid internships**.

2.1.2.Reports from the organizing team

The conference was a wonderful experience for attending students, but it was even more of a learning experience for the organizing team! Here is some of their feedback from the conference:

Matías Díaz Roqueta (EUSTT Head of Events and student of the UPF):

"At the BeEUTOPIAn Student Conference, I had the chance to exchange with students from many of the EUTOPIA universities across Europe and **we had the chance to engage in discussions about pressing issues for us the young**. It was thrilling to actually be a part of an example of intercultural and inter-ideological dialogue in practice.

The BeEUTOPIAn Student Conference was also special for me as the EUTOPIA Student Think Tank Head of Events, since it was the first event I organised. I must say it was not easy, and the way ahead was not always obvious. Sometimes getting the speakers or arranging the logistics was an uphill road. However, I truly have to thank the BeEUTOPIAn Organising Team, and our hosts at VUB, because their dedication and availability were essential to getting the conference to the finish line.

I can now say that the conference was a success and an excellent learning opportunity, plus at the EUSTT we have been able to recruit new people from the BeEUTOPIAn pool of talent and identify possible partnerships with other EUTOPIAn organisations and engaged students."

Sílvia Teixeira (EUSTT Representative at Universidade NOVA de Lisboa):

"I had the great pleasure to be a part of the Communications Team of the Organizational Committee for the student-led BeEUTOPIAN Conference that took place at Vrije Universiteit Brussel from 25th to 26th of April 2022, and it was an incredible experience. Organizing a conference with a group of people that I've never met in a country that I have never been to might sound like a challenge but it was a fun one, and very rewarding too! **I got to meet and speak with students from all different places with very different stories**.

On the second day of the conference we had a workshop called "The Changemakers Workshop". We were divided into groups of four and each group had a topic (For example, housing, unpaid internships), and then we had to research that topic and find solutions. In just 20 minutes each

group was able to find at least two solutions and present them to the rest of the audience. **If we could do that in 20 minutes, imagine what we could do if we could connect more often**.

I can't wait to see again all the wonderful people I met because of EUTOPIA, I really think it's a great project and couldn't be more proud to be a part of it."

Miša Glišič (EUSTT Representative at Univeristy of Ljubljana):

It was **a pleasure organizing the BeEUTOPIAn conference** this year and **participating as a speaker as well**. There were some struggles with the agenda as with any public event, but **we overcame obstacles with excellent networking between the Partner Universities**. The effort was priceless with adding a human note to every aspect of the conference. Our colleagues from Vrije Universiteit Brussel made everyone feel welcome and assured hospitality, friendship, and good times.

It was a one-of-a-kind feeling to form a unique and intercultural student group and share our worldviews. Thanks to the BeEUTIPAn Team for giving me the opportunity to speak about Cultural Awareness and the Importance of Transculturally on a global scale. **I enjoyed every minute, discussing global challenges and political matters with brilliant young minds.**

The conference was a big success. Together, **United in Diversity, we will continue to work for a Brighter Future for Young Talents** in the Framework of the EUTIOPIA Student Think Thank!

Antara Islam (Student from the University of Gothenburg):

I was part of the communication team and was responsible to create Instagram content and a programme brochure along with my fellow team members. Not only did the final conference integrate the concept of hybridity, but a significant portion of the conference preparation was also held online using collaborative tools. **It was amazing to see how students from different European universities sitting remotely can share their expertise and work together to achieve a common goal – organizing BeEUTOPIAn 2022 conference successfully.** I had a new role during the conference as logistics support. At the same time, I also participated in the 'Wall of Post-Pandemic Emotions' and was amazed to see how similar we are in our lockdown and post lockdown experiences. In the 'Changemaker' session on the second day, **I had a chance to brainstorm and present recommendations on rising housing prices and their impact on students.**

During the event, Matías Díaz Roqueta, the EUSTT's Head of Events, played an important role to make the participants feel comfortable. Students from universities of different European countries traveled to Brussels to attend this conference. A shared interest in bringing a positive change in European universities bonded these students from diverse educational and ethnic backgrounds.

We have indeed spent two days exploring 'The New Possible, At Hand'

Giulia Quadraccia (Student from Ca'Foscari University of Venice):

The 2022 BeEUTOPIAn Conference was the **first project in two years that I have seen growing, developing, and finally getting to experience in person and not beyond a screen**. All this would not have been possible without my teammates, only by helping each other did we manage to make the conference a success, and at the same time, **we created a strong bond between us**. We aimed to do the same with the public: we wanted the public to be as active as possible to make it feel connected with the speakers, with the organizational team, and with other participants as well, so as to **strengthen the EUTOPIA community.**

2.2. Additional note: EUSTT report on 2021/2022 conference

The EUTOPIA Student Think Tank (EUSTT) have also produced a report on the 2021/2022 conference. Please see the additional document titled, 'WP6.2.3 Student 'BeEUTOPIAn!' conference EUSTT report'.