

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### LOVE.DIST@NCE: A PROPOSED MODEL FOR INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH E-LEARNING, IN ISRAEL AND GEORGIA

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Higher Education (HE) has seen an astounding growth across the world in recent decades, and about a third of the population globally now go online to some form of post-secondary study. While there are increasing participation rates in all regions, there are still some significant disparities, with a gross enrolment ratio of 68% in Europe, 23% in Southern Asia and 9% in Sub-Saharan Africa (data from UNESCO Institute of Statistics). Furthermore, within specific countries, there are marked inequalities of opportunity.

A well-educated citizenry is the foundation of social equity, cohesion and successful participation in the global knowledge economy. As a result, most countries have set goals to increase the share of the population with HE and/or broaden access to HE for individuals that are under-represented because of socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, religion, age, gender, [dis]ability or location. As a general rule, countries with low rates of participation in HE seek to expand access by increasing the number of opportunities available while countries that have already achieved a significant level of participation in HE tend to focus on broadening access so as to include more individuals from under-represented groups. Researchers and policy makers believe that Distance Learning (DL) can drive equity, accessibility to, and democratization of HE, regardless of the degree of HE proliferation in the population. Georgia and Israel are two countries that already identified such needs nationally and are highly committed to enlarge their offer of HE services for **those that, locally, still can't participate in HE programs. They were established as LOVE DISTANCE** partner countries.

The Israeli society is diverse, both ethnically and economically. Its population is composed of 22% non-Jewish minorities including Muslims, Bedouins, Christians and Druze, most living in low socio-economic locations. Among the Jewish majority, there are ultra-Orthodox (8%) and Ethiopia-origin (1.5%) groups, as well as populations living in geographic and low socio-economic periphery. Whereas common barriers as poor prior education and insufficient economic resources prevent these minorities from access to HE, ultra-Orthodox people sometimes refrain from HE due to religious constraints such as the need for gender separation in campuses/classes. According to recent data from the Israeli Statistics Bureau, 45% of high school graduates in Israel proceed to academic HE. However, there are significant gaps among various populations within the Israeli society. For example, among the Jewish sector, 48% of high school graduates continue to academic studies, whereas among the Arabic population only 29% do so. Large gaps are also identified within the Jewish population. Only 32% of young high school graduates in low socio-economic settlements continue to academic studies, whereas 62%, almost double as much, of young people from high socio-economic locations do so. These reflect disparities among the different sectors within the Israeli society. Research counts three major causes of HE disparities: family resources, school structure (particularly high school), and HE institution (HEI) requirements. Policy makers

in the Israeli HEI believe that DL can alleviate these three factors by allowing people strengthening their pre-academic education, and by learning academic courses in a less resource-demanding manner.

Being a post-Soviet country, Georgia experienced some economic problems, which influenced the universities as well. As most of the students must pay for their education, it is very common for them to have a job at the same time of their studies. In some cases, it means they are unable to attend all the classes. Besides, some of them are from rural regions and cannot afford living in the capital, **especially those from ethnic minority groups (Azerbaijanis and Armenians). Also, a great number of indoors' refugees, coming** from occupied territory in Georgia have lost access to HE as part of their life projects. Therefore, DL will be a solution in these cases, as students will be able to get quality education even without attending every single class. The majority of the HEIs in Georgia have been transforming nowadays. Georgian HEIs must respond to the new external forces of the National Authorisation of Universities. Individualized educational programs should offer students appropriate format and conditions of teaching, learning and assessment to students with different requirements or special educational needs. Becoming integral part of the European HE Area since 2004, Georgian universities have been trying to align their teaching and learning processes with European HE standards and requirements to ensure compatibility of its curriculum, synchronization of the learning outcomes that support effective student mobility and enhance the degree of internationalization within the national education system in general and individual HE institutions in particular. That being said, HEIs have been seeking effective ways to provide quality teaching and learning processes, including DL.

## LOVE.DIST@NCE Aims and Project Design

This project started as a way to respond to the needs stated by Georgian and Israeli HEI and stated as its main goal to promote inclusive education in Israel and Georgia by widening access to higher education for potential and existing students from vulnerable groups, religious and ethnic minorities, refugees, student-workers and students living at peripheral/distant/rural areas, defined in this project as target groups.

In the last years, the European Union became a reference point for policy dialogue with several regions of the world on higher education (HE) and its key role for employability of graduates. The growing global dimension of education still needs further actions for the enhancement of exchanges between the EU and other parts of the world, namely the eastern part of Europe, sharing goals and principles, as the transparent recognition of studies and qualifications.

**Program countries' HEIs were chosen from those with high degree of expertise in providing DL in European countries or others** also dealing with similar problems. This project counts with the participation of Portugal (Instituto Politécnico do Porto), Spain (Universidade de Vigo and FUNIBER) and Romania (Technical University of Cluj Napoca). The HE institutions involved have a high level of experience regarding the preparation of learning materials in electronic formats for students and a high capacity to help teachers and staff to respond to the specific needs of each institution. These HE institutions, with those involved from Georgia and Israel, intend to improve the educational integration of disadvantaged learners in their educational system (identified target groups) and facilitate transfer of best practices to expand access to, participation in, and successful completion of distance learning programs in all countries.

Specific objectives were defined, in order to respond to identified needs in both countries, regarding institutional, staff and student capacities, development of curricula offer, facilitate accessibility to teaching and learning materials as well as raise public awareness to access, equity and democratization of HE, to promote social inclusion.

LOVE.DIST@NCE goals were defined in work meetings and a strategic triennial work-plan was developed and adjusted by the consortium to the partner countries' specifications. In the first year the focus will be on support material development and transferring of good practices in DL from the program countries to the partner countries' HEI. There will also be data collection about students' and lecturers' perceptions regarding equity access and democratization in High Education and their competences in ICT. Case studies will be presented in video or text format. Toolkits for online students and virtual teachers will be prepared in order to deploy democratized distance learning in selected scenarios. During the second year, two pilots will take place in both countries in different moments, including several courses selected and designed specifically to address minorities and special populations. The first pilot will be directly supported and supervised by EU HEI. In fact, EU partners will have a close role in maintaining active work and communication between all partners, as regular meetings will be held, and specific short-term goals will be addressed to each partner.

As LOVE.DIST@NCE surpasses a simple linear competence transferring process, in the third year EU partners intend to prepare materials and local staff to be able to autonomously transfer their knowledge and experiences in their own HEI, searching for an exponential effect. Through this, the consortium will indirectly reach a larger number of members in each institution and local community. Dissemination strategy will also address to academia, current and potential students, and community.

## Prospective results

Implementation of an appropriate and sustainable strategy and procedures regarding DL in HEIs in the participating regions is expected, focussing on the target groups identified in order to increase the number of participants from target groups in HE. Above all, although LOVE.DIST@NCE efforts are focused in developing technical competences, the consortium is entirely motivated to address minorities and to provide alternatives to Israeli and Georgian HE policies. Teacher, technical and administrative staff in these countries will lead this transformation and, for this motivation, there is a work package designed to build in-house capacities. Their motivation will build new opportunities for many new students which, through Education, will develop a different way of seeing their futures and being empowered and committed citizens. At the end, Israeli and Georgian HEI will become adequately trained, technically equipped, more experienced and able to assume their own options in terms of the more adequate options to take into their future.

## Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the contribution of the LOVE.DIST@NCE team that actively provided information to write this article, especially from partner countries. From Israel: Tsipi Heart, Alona Forkosh-Baruch, Judy Arad, Sharon Hardof and Gal Manor. From Georgia: Giga Khositashvili, Tamar Aslanishvili and Nana Makaradze. Special thanks to our Project Coordinator Ângelo Jesus.