

INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH E-LEARNING IN ISRAEL AND GEORGIA. PRELIMINARY RESULTS FROM AN ONGOING PROJECT

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Abstract. Higher Education has seen growth across the world in recent decades. However, there are large asymmetries in terms of access, with specific countries/regions showing marked inequalities of opportunities, especially in population groups that are underrepresented due to socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, religion, age, gender, disability, or origin geographic location. At the same time, access to the internet has become widespread and has proven its potential as a way of democratizing access to information. The Love.Dist@nce project was created to respond to the needs of Georgia and Israel, with input from European partners, with the aim of promoting inclusive education through distance learning. After 18 months of activity, the project is continuing its course and several reports and support materials have already been created that will serve as a basis for the implementation of pilot curricular units currently in progress, involving teachers, students, and non-teaching staff.

Keywords: Higher Education; E-learning; Equity; Democratization; Access

Higher Education (HE) has seen surprising growth around the world in recent decades. However, there are large asymmetries in terms of access. It appears that specific countries/regions have marked inequalities of opportunities. Many have set targets to increase the share of the population with higher education and/or expand access to higher education for individuals who are underrepresented due to socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, religion, age, gender, disability or geographic origin. At the same time, access to the internet has become widespread and has proven its potential as a way of democratizing access to information (Shearer et al., 2019). Distance Learning (DL) has been explored as a solution, as the distance teaching-learning process is developed using electronic means, through the Internet (Barger, 2020; Drolia et al., 2020). However, a transition in the communication channel is not enough for teaching to take place efficiently. Several teaching methodologies have been developed and validated, including a combination of synchronous/simultaneous or asynchronous/deferred communication strategies and means (Singh & Thurman, 2019). In this sense, the Love.Dist@nce project was created to respond to the needs of Georgia and Israel, with the contribution of European partners (Portugal, Spain and Romania) (Araújo et al., 2020).

In Georgia, the main target groups were: student workers, students with reduced accessibility or displaced people in remote regions, ethnic minorities (Azerbaijan and Armenia) and populations in occupied territory (conflict zone). In Israel, target groups include minority ethnic or religious groups such as Arabs, Bedouins, Druze, Ethiopian and ultra-Orthodox women, but also students with special needs (Araújo et al., 2020).

Thus, the main objective is to promote inclusive education through distance education, expanding access to higher education for students from vulnerable groups. Thus, the operational objectives of the project are:

- Develop curriculum offer in distance education
- Train teachers and employees in DL processes and technologies
- Create resources in Georgia and Israel to support these programs
- Sensitize the population to access equity and democratization of HE
- Capture and train students from identified vulnerable groups
- Adapt teaching-learning methodologies to identified vulnerable groups.

1. Project Characterization

A needs assessment was carried out in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Israel and Georgia, which were already partners of the School of Health of the Polytechnic Institute of Porto (ESS-P.Porto) in a previous international project (Project ABC - Assisting Better Communication).

Table 1. Countries and institutions participating in the Love.Dist@nce consortium.

COUNTRIES	INSTITUTION
Program Countries	Portugal P.Porto - Polytechnic Institute of Porto
	Spain FUNIBER – Iberoamerican University Foundation
	UVIGO – University of Vigo
Partner Countries	Romania TUCN - Technical University of Cluj Napoca
	ISU - Ilia State University
	Georgia TeSaU – Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University
	BSU – Shota Rustaveli Batumi State University
	OAC - Ono Academic College
Israel	LCE – Lewinski College of Education
	MEITAL – Interuniversity Computation Center

ESS-P.Porto was invited to lead a consortium comprising 10 institutions from Portugal, Spain and Romania, countries of the European Union (EU) and Georgia and Israel, partner countries (Table 1). The project is designed to run over a period of 3 years, having started in January 2020 and is expected to be completed in January 2023. It was approved by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) with funding of €800,368. It is divided into work packages including preparation, development, quality, dissemination, and management.

The work plan briefly includes:

1. prior preparation of institutional and national characterization reports (both for EU countries and for beneficiaries);
2. development of a virtual campus and support materials (texts, infographics, templates, etc.)
3. intensive training (Training of Trainers) for teachers and non-teaching staff;
4. two phases of pilot studies, including curricular units from all HEIs in partner countries, interspersed with joint review and supervision meetings;
5. internal training in each HEI in partner countries, promoting the transfer of skills of the teachers and non-teachers involved to the rest of the institutional community;
6. acquisition of technological resources for HEIs in partner countries;
7. management meetings (in person or remotely) in each quarter, including external audits;
8. definition of quality assessment processes, including training, periodic meetings and internal and external audits;
9. dissemination plan, including the creation of a website, presence on social networks, participation in events inside and outside each HEI involved and publication of the project's outputs and organization of an international conference at the end of the project.

2. Preliminary Results

After 18 months of activity, Love.Dist@nce is on schedule, having submitted the interim report to the EACEA in September 2021. However, the Covid-19 pandemic had several implications for the development of the project, namely the need to suppress or postpone the face-to-face activities such as meetings or trainings. On the other hand, the relevance of the project was highlighted by the pandemic itself, as access to higher education was compromised during this period, not only for disadvantaged groups, but for the entire population. During the first half of

the project, resources and contents were developed and are beginning to bear fruit. There are several materials available for free use on the project website (www.lovedistance.eu), many of them in English, Georgian and Hebrew, mostly a product of the preparation (already completed) and development (ongoing) phases. So far 37 professors and 12 non-teaching staff have been trained. The first phase of pilot courses is currently underway (Table 2).

Table 2. Pilot Courses in phase 1 of the project.

INSTITUTION	PILOT COURSE	TARGET GROUP
ISU	Georgian as Second Language	Student workers; Students from remote regions; Ethnic minorities (Azerbaijan and Armenia).
	Marketing Toxicology	
TeSaU	General English	Students from remote regions; Ethnic minorities (Azerbaijan and Kisti).
	Information and Technology English	
BSU	Basics of Tourism and Hospitality	Student workers;
OAC	Math for pre-academic studies	Special needs; Ethnic Minorities (Arabs); peripheries; ultra-religious
	Academic Literacy Academic English Proficiency	
LCE	Racism in the Israeli Society	Special needs; Ethnic Minorities (Arabs); peripheries; ultra-religious
	English for Academic Purposes Basic Mathematics	

3. Impact and Future Work

During the second half of the project, Love.Distance intends to find the best strategies, not only to promote access to higher education, but especially the success of the most disadvantaged populations. Thus, an ambitious work plan is defined, which includes evaluation of the results of phase 1 pilots, internal training for the transmission of skills among peers, carrying out phase 2 pilots and various dissemination activities. If there is a possibility of resuming in-person activities, a visit to reference European HEIs will also be promoted, allowing the identification and transfer of work and organizational models. The project will culminate with an international conference on the subject. Thus, by 2023 an exponential impact is expected within and outside the institutions involved.

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