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Editorial: Increased quality education through cross-campus learning environments

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Increased quality education through cross-campus learning environments

The sustainable development goals (SDG) have expanded the focus to quality in higher education for everyone (Global Sustainable Development Report, 2023). This calls for equal, inclusive access to higher education with a focus on diversity, and lifelong learning. Similarly, the vision for the European Union (EU) also calls for *universities without walls* and specificaly for 1) universities to be open transformative and transnational through hybrid offerings, where "physical and digital learning and research environments must be designed in a holistic way to accommodate the different needs of a diverse university community and allow for flexible and blended approaches" (European University Association, 2021, p. 5, 6). Secondly, they call for universities to be sustainable, diverse, and engaged so that they are equipped to welcome students from all backgrounds, having learning environments designed to accommodate the needs of a diverse student body, and having students equipped to work in diverse environments (European University Association, 2021, p. 6).

It is within this context that there is a need for more flexible, inclusive, and diverse higher education programs that give students the opportunity to choose a mix of pedagogical approaches, such as online and face-to-face opportunities, that best meet their needs. The increased need for flexibility is of utmost importance for in-service students that are unable to leave their home area to further their education. In the paper by Versteijlen et al. the authors argue for a flexible education that reduces the need for students to travel to campus, and thus reduce the overall carbon footprint.

The present Research Topic focuses on cross-campus and multi-campus hybrid and full online digital learning environments that have the potential to sustain and guarantee continuity in the learners' higher education and their need for lifelong learning opportunities. The importance of reducing isolation by online supervision, published in this Research Topic, is the focus of the paper by Petit et al.. The educators offer the students practical support and check in with them at the beginning and duration of the internship to prevent the students from feeling alone and disconnected. The importance of social bonding and communication between students and educators as well as amongst students is one of the main findings in the paper by Lysne et al. which discusses a cross-campus

study program. This is further highlighted in the discussion by De Caro-Barek et al. where the role of the human factor is described as the glue in learning practices whereas the paper by Versteijlen et al. highlights the need for good student communication. According to these authors, a flexible hybrid learning arena in higher education, with a mix of online and face-to-face education, needs to rest on six pedagogical principles: (1) encouragement of self-regulation in a students' learning process, (2) fostering a sense of community, (3) facilitating interaction and discussion amongst fellow students and the lecturer, (4) activating knowledge transfer, (5) offering authentic, scaffolded and theory-based practice, and (6) collaborating for constructing a shared outcome through participation and negotiation with fellow students. The importance of students active learning, with peer learning and collaboration is further highlighted by Lysne et al. in this Research Topic.

In the paper by Cheung et al., they demonstrate that there are no differences in student ratings on the effectiveness between face-to-face and synchronous online teaching in classes larger than 25 students, due to the live instruction component in the online mode. The size of the class seems to be more important than the mode of the teaching. Therefore, we should not resist the move to teaching online, but rather focus on how teaching is organized and how student active learning is facilitated. However, the research in this Research Topic has identified that much of the time and resources are still spent on the technological part when flexible learning arenas are developed (Lysne et al.). In addition, Lysne et al. argued that the focus should be on pedagogy and that learning space and technology needs should be developed to support the pedagogical goals. This is in accordance with De Caro-Barek et al. who argue that Radcliffe's Pedagogy-Space-Technology (PST) framework (Radcliffe et al., 2008) needs to be further developed to include more focus on the human factor when discussing pedagogy, as this element expresses the human interaction that occurs in the learning space.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of online learning tools by educators rapidly accelerated in higher education. The aftermaths have shown us the potential benefits of developing and using blended learning environments. Aristovnik et al. gives an overview of selected research during the pandemic, which reveals the challenges, but also the options related to online teaching. On the other hand, De Caro-Barek and Støckert describe how organizational constraints can negatively affect development in education, especially with programs that involve more than one university. They also claim that we must question whether it is becoming counterproductive to let economic concerns trump the social mandate that higher education needs to fulfill. From an institutional perspective, cross-campus scenarios may increase the number of students and ensure a more economical and sustainable solution for smaller programs, thus, allowing a wider variety of study programs at the universities.

To conclude, the difference in the quality of the teaching is not between pedagogical approaches such as face-to-face and online teaching, but rather depends on the quality of the learning and teaching experiences where peer learning, learner agency, student active learning and communication between educators and students needs to be facilitated (Hilli et al., 2019; Nørgård, 2021; Nørgård and Hilli, 2022). There is a need for more research on the design of hybrid and cross-campus learning spaces with a focus on pedagogy, and where learning space and technology needs should support the pedagogical goals of the course. For example, how to develop the quality of student communication and collaboration when students connect both on campus and online at the same time. A multi-campus setting can easily become complex, with several learning activities often occurring in both the online and face-to-face learning environments. There is a need for further research in this area and perhaps this is an opportunity for Artificial Intelligence (AI) to be used to support educators as they further design and refine teaching and learning activities with an emphasis on quality and access? For example, can AI be used to answer student questions based on related literature or to perhaps support them during brainstorming activities for class activities? The role of generative AI (GenAI) has now come to the forefront of educational discussions since many of these research papers were written and has become a tool that has potential for many educators, albeit a tool which is also being critically assessed for its purpose and usefulness as well.

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