

Conferences and international collaboration revisited in times of the coronavirus: Experiences from a digital transition and lessons for the future

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1. Introduction

Everything was booked and ready to go for a two-day scientific workshop on education policies in Europe, scheduled for April 23-24, 2020 at the Hertie School in Berlin. The workshop intended to take stock of developments at the European, national and sub-national levels given the European Union's wrap up of its decade-long Education & Training 2020 strategy (ET 2020), a framework for cooperation in education and training. However, on March 12, we had to cancel the physical meeting on short notice due to the coronavirus crisis. In the following, we share our experiences with the subsequent transition to an alternative online workshop format that took place on April 23, involving 25 participants from 10 countries, and 16 paper presentations. After sketching the workshop's virtual set-up, we discuss strengths, weaknesses, and challenges related to this digital transition. Furthermore, we explore the prospects of such online formats for future academic conferences and networking.

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2. The workshop format

From the very beginning, it was clear to us that the original workshop format could not be simply transferred online. We did not expect participants to attend a two-day workshop behind their screens, while having to handle private commitments in the home office. It was no easy task turning our two-day workshop into a much shorter online session on such short notice, and without role models in this still early phase of the lockdown. In the process of designing the new workshop format, many questions came up.

How do we allow every one of our 25 participants to introduce themselves and their research? How can we make sure that all participants receive valuable feedback on their paper presentations? What time frame is appropriate for meaningful interaction while bearing in mind that sitting in front of a screen can get very tiring? How can we allow for informal exchange and networking, which would have normally happened during coffee breaks? In the end, we decided on holding a two-hour long virtual workshop followed by another 30 minutes of optional, informal online exchange.

The official two-hour workshop timeframe was divided into three parts: an initial joint welcome session including introductions; smaller group sessions in thematically divided breakout groups; and a final plenum including reports on discussions held in the breakout groups, and further room for open exchange.

In preparation for the workshop, we created a detailed timetable including speaking orders and times as well as moderator roles. Strict timekeeping was of paramount importance in order to grant all participants their share of presentation time. During our initial welcome session, we gave every researcher two minutes to introduce themselves and provide a brief elevator pitch of their paper. Similar to real-world conference practice, we showed a visual cue to signal the approaching end of speaking time. After the round of introductions had concluded, we sent the workshop participants into thematically pre-assigned and smaller group sessions, so-called “breakout groups”, where they had the opportunity to present their papers to each other.

Our five breakout groups covered the following topics:

- Education reforms, policy learning in Europe and actors’ policy goals
- Regional networks and European cooperation in higher education
- New architectures, instruments and practices for cooperation and learning
- Changing skill formation – Responses to technological changes and economic crises
- Multilevel educational governance and (sub-)national implementation

The breakout sessions were facilitated by one moderator per group, who was also in charge of timekeeping. We asked every group to decide on one rapporteur, who would report on the group’s

discussions in the subsequent plenary session. That way, interesting findings could be shared with everyone in the workshop. Besides including reports from the different breakout groups, our final plenary session allowed participants to raise further discussion points. For those who wished to continue the conversation, we offered an additional 30-minute, optional informal exchange session in our virtual meeting room.

3. Strengths and weaknesses

We received much positive feedback on our online workshop. In times of restricted travel, the virtual event allowed for a productive exchange across 10 countries. But even in non-coronavirus times, digital events have advantages. Not only was this online format much more climate-friendly than a physical meeting. It also took place without incurring travel or accommodation costs. We also think that this online format is very inclusive as it allows for the participation of those who are unable to travel due to health reasons, family duties, or other work commitments.

This type of online workshop can be especially valuable for the establishment of initial contact between researchers. During the first plenary session, which lasted less than an hour, our workshop participants got to know each other and their current projects. This type of “research speed dating” facilitates individual follow-ups, which can then lead to future collaborations. While the limited time frame of a remote workshop might not produce the deeper exchanges of a physical multi-day event, it can provide fruitful soil for international networking, exchange, and future collaboration.

Of course, an online workshop cannot replace the personal exchange taking place at a physical event. Most participant interactions were rather strictly planned and moderated, and did not allow for spontaneous bilateral exchange during a coffee break or other types of informal settings. As we did not want the virtual session to go on for too long, each presenter only had a limited time to

engage with the audience. In addition, we had to cancel the public outreach panel originally planned as part of the physical workshop.

The biggest weakness of online events is the ever-present risk of technical problems. To mitigate this, we conducted several test runs, during which we set up our breakout rooms and practiced screen sharing. We also assigned multiple moderator roles, in case the moderator lost their connection and someone else would have to take over. To ensure a good participant experience, we provided our workshop participants with instructions on how to set up the videoconferencing software a few days in advance, and allowed them to enter the meeting room 20 minutes prior to our starting time so that they could try out different functions.

4. Challenges

Organizing an online workshop comes with a different set of challenges in comparison to regular on-site events which should be considered upfront. Among the difficulties encountered when organizing an online workshop are, of course, time differences. Including and enabling your audience to connect from different parts around the world is an issue to be considered when choosing a date and time for your remote event.

Another aspect that is paramount in relation to online workshops links to the chosen technology. Given that each software has distinct features and a different user experience, it proves valuable to dedicate some time to researching, comparing, testing, and training the options available.

It is equally important to get all participants on track concerning the technical requirements: how do you access the platform, should videos and microphones be turned on or off etc. Another element concerns the question of how participant contributions are organized. Should there be slides or just unmoderated speech? A preparatory email specifying logistics and session formats ensures that everyone is in the same boat and will facilitate

fruitful exchange rather than discussions over technology and set-up.

When holding a remote workshop, time keeping is maybe even more important than during a regular conference. A firm but friendly moderation ensures that everyone has enough time to present their work. Lastly, at regular conferences, there are plenty of opportunities to network and exchange during the main sessions and panels but also at coffee breaks, lunches, dinners and receptions. Rather self-evidently, online workshops cannot offer these rich exchanges. To nevertheless allow for such interactions, organizers should consider creating alternative channels to foster discussions and exchange between participants. In our case, we reserved a 30-minute slot following the general programme, but also email exchanges, mailing groups and other communication platforms (e.g., Slack) can be options.

5. Assessment & outlook for future events

Based on our experiences and participants' feedback, we believe that the "last minute" transition from physical to online workshop was successful. Despite cut downs on the structure and timeframe, and a re-organisation of the programme, moving the event online enabled us to run our long-planned workshop after all. This format was created in response to (widespread) coronavirus restrictions, however, we argue that online workshops and conferences are a promising type of event for our research community that, in future, should be considered a serious addition or even alternative to traditional formats.

Remote conferences are cost- and time-saving, and certainly a climate friendly alternative. In addition, online formats can be inclusive and allow for participation particularly for those people not able to attend conferences otherwise. This stretches from participants that have other commitments (work, family duties etc.) and cannot be away for a

longer period of time to those with limited access to resources for business travel. Furthermore, online alternatives might also tackle the problem of last-minute cancellations or no-shows that occur due to unforeseen or conflicting commitments, both personal and/or work-related.

In sum, there are several valid arguments that point to the stronger inclusion of online formats as channels of exchange in our research community. One could either think about moving entire workshops online, or merely parts of larger conferences. The latter could be done, for instance, by offering streaming opportunities of keynotes or enabling online participation and presentations in panel sessions. Doing so would also signal responsiveness to changing (working) conditions and private needs. The lockdown in response to the spreading of the coronavirus has hence offered a new perspective on formats of online academic exchange and their limitations.

In addition, we want to stress what has been long known in online teaching and distance learning: offline formats cannot be moved online without any alterations – as online formats have their own potentials and pitfalls. This contribution can be understood as shedding further light on these new formats with their advantages and limitations. Finally, we would like to note that attending a remote conference is a human experience. Participants invite us into their homes and vice versa, with all of its surprises. This experience requires spontaneity, understanding in case of parenting distractions, and respect for privacy on the part of all participants.