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Discussing international education

RESILIENCE IN UNCERTAIN TIMES



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09

“In times of crisis, we can still choose how to respond to a difficult situation so that we learn and grow from the experience”

CHOOSING A CULTURE OF RESILIENCE

23

“Our institutions are highly exposed to danger, yet we view our vulnerability as a source of strength”

LIFE ON THE EDGE



34

“People want things black and white, but at this moment what we have to learn is that things are changing every five minutes”

IN CONVERSATION WITH MARÍA JOSÉ FIGUERAS SALVAT

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“We want a better world – and now is the time to think more systematically about how universities’ international actions can help to advance that”

TWO PRIORITIES FOR THE REBUILD



KEEPING REFUGEES CONNECTED IN A CRISIS

An integration scheme for refugees at the University of Geneva has managed, thanks to the great dedication of its staff, to keep operating during lockdown. Its success in offering equal access to education, providing language lessons and promoting well-being could help inform future support programmes for vulnerable people during critical situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

As early as the end of February, the world was astounded to discover that a coronavirus pandemic of rare violence was about to descend with deadly intensity on many countries. This pandemic spread at a much faster pace than anticipated, leaving institutions in a state of shock.

The solution adopted by the Swiss authorities was a sudden lockdown of the country and postponement of academic activities. Although appreciated by the vast majority of the population, this sudden university closure naturally caused problems and side effects. It had an impact on students' health, access to education and employment, social support, interpersonal relationships, finances and psychological well-being. An integrated vision to respond to these problems was particularly challenging to implement for students with specific needs and scarce personal resources, including refugees and migrants.

GENEVA'S INTEGRATION SCHEME

Since 2016, refugee students have been welcomed at the University of Geneva in the framework of an integration scheme called the Academic Horizon programme. Inspired by other European universities during the 2015 refugee crisis, the University of Geneva took innovative measures to respond to the large influx of highly-educated refugees reaching Europe. The aim of the Academic Horizon programme is to encourage the resumption of academic careers among migrants, as people forced into exile have great difficulty finding academic opportunities in host countries.

Academic Horizon enables access to university courses in each faculty; provides academic, professional and social follow-up by social workers and mentors; supports French-language acquisition; and fosters a sense of community and belonging through initiatives such as cultural events, leisure activities and informal meetings. Since its creation, it has

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helped 338 people of more than 20 different nationalities. This sample, with an average age of 32 years, is made up of 52% women. The vast majority of beneficiaries are asylum seekers (80%); the others are

continued remotely, without interruption, throughout the whole lockdown period.

Thanks to the active support of private foundations, the programme was able to provide students with the computer

People forced into exile have great difficulty finding academic opportunities in host countries

people who arrived in Switzerland under family reunification programmes, or Swiss nationals returning from abroad.

RESPONDING TO THE CRISIS

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown, the continuation of the programme was considered to be important as a way of promoting resilience and well-being among beneficiaries who had been plunged into uncertainty due to limited access to support resources. With great dedication on the part of the programme's staff, it was therefore

equipment essential to continuing studies online. This urgent practical measure has helped to reduce social inequity derived from the digital gap.

Social and educational duties, meanwhile, have been maintained through online initiatives. By being able to count on great professional competence and strong human commitment, the pedagogical support for French classes has been adapted to videoconferencing and delivered on a regular basis. This has allowed students to continue their progress in language acquisition.

Mentors played a crucial role during confinement as the only link between Academic Horizon participants and other students. In order to maintain social contacts, the Academic Horizon community also met for weekly online cafés, uniting participants, mentors and staff. These meetings allowed participants to exchange ideas, share good practices and break the loneliness that they may have experienced while being under lockdown in a foreign country in times of threat and uncertainty.

PSYCHOSOCIAL INTERVENTION

As well as fulfilling its educational objectives during lockdown, the programme provided valuable psychosocial support. In fact, Academic Horizon activities matched recommendations put forward by bodies such as the Leibniz Institute for Resilience Research to strengthen resilience and promote well-being. Some of these are shown in the table overleaf.

Recommendation	Description
Demonstrate flexibility	Seek information from reliable sources, such as relevant health authorities. Keep in mind that the situation is rapidly developing. Academic support needs to be continuously scaled up to this changing reality.
Maintain routines or implement new ones	Make sure you provide a varied daily structure. Intersperse academic activities with time for social activities and recreation.
Maintain social contacts	Relationships of trust are essential in times of crisis. Use technical devices to stay in touch.
Accept complexity	Develop an attitude of acceptance of the crisis. This can advance educational goals while releasing overwhelmed minds from stressful thoughts.
Take care of yourself and others	Suggest enough sleep, healthy food and abundant exercise. Discourage harmful strategies, such as using alcohol or other substances to regulate emotions.
Take responsibility	In times of crisis, staff, teachers and mentors have a crucial influence on peers and students. Promote behaviours to take care of students, colleagues, friends, family and seniors. Take concrete actions to reduce inequities such as digital poverty.
Reduce stress regularly	Take breaks and consider complementing educational programmes with cultural, spiritual or relaxing activities that reduce stress and encourage recovery.
Be open with your students	Talk to your students: reassure them that you are there and that you care for them. Discuss your plans for the next few weeks. Clarify open questions.
Prepare your students for isolation	Allow your students to use their time to reflect. Offer entertainment through books, games or new learning. Help students and colleagues to deal with possible interpersonal conflicts through discussion.
Be alert to acute stress	Screen for severe distress. If, for example, panic or depression becomes unbearable, contact a local counselling centre. In case of acute suicidal thoughts, contact the emergency department of your local psychiatric hospital or emergency services immediately.

Empirical research is now ongoing to ascertain whether the Academic Horizon programme has improved resilience and well-being as well as educational competencies. Preliminary data are encouraging and indicate that this is indeed the case.

In summary, academic integration programmes may be considered beneficial for refugees' adjustment, resilience and general well-being. Such schemes correspond with the World Health Organization's call for mental health

promotion with scalable low-intensity psychosocial interventions effective for helping vulnerable people suffering from disabling stress, depression and anxiety.

Our observations give hope for the development of a new generation of academic support programmes for vulnerable people and for critical situations such as a pandemic. These programmes can take concrete action in favour of equal access to education and mental health, and psychosocial outcomes of academic projects could further be facilitated

by specific training and supervision of mentors. Further in-depth analysis of the management of this crisis in difficult educational contexts will provide solid, evidence-based guidance on how to respond to future waves of infection with the best of our knowledge and commitment.

—GRAZIA CESCHI & MATHIEU CRETENAND



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