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He has been active in internationalisation since 1995, dealing with university-wide policy formulation and execution on different aspects of internationalisation, including student and staff mobility, development cooperation, services for international staff and students, international educational projects and strategic networking.

Piet has been active in the leadership of several professional associations and nonprofits at the national and international level for many years, such as Flanders Knowledge Area, ACA, the NGO APOPO and the EAIE. He presents frequently on a wide range of topics related to internationalisation of higher education.

Digitalisation in International Higher Education

What was gained and what was lost: some reflections on digitalisation, the pandemic and the way forward

The concept of digitalisation has been obviously present in every debate, every policy document and every strategic plan in the past years and decades. It is thrown around liberally as a top priority, a given, a kind of 'force of nature', much like 'globalisation'. It becomes an element of competition, where future success depends on the speed and depth with which a country, a government, an organisation or an individual can absorb this imperative and become a leader in exploring how far it can be taken.

REVOLUTIONS & THE TOOLS THEY PROVIDE

Where the First and Second Industrial Revolutions were based on the introduction of steam engines and electric power respectively, digitalisation is a key feature of the Third Industrial Revolution, sparked by the availability of computers, as well as the emerging Fourth one, which some are describing as being "characterised by a range of new technologies that are fusing the physical, digital and biological worlds, impacting all disciplines, economies and industries, and even challenging ideas about what it means to be human". In this sense, digitalisation is seen as a seismic shift in the very fundamentals of how our society and economy function. Digital tools lead to an exponential leap in efficiency in virtually all areas and to exciting possibilities, which never existed before.

The truth is, however, that digital tools are just that: tools. We humans make individual and collective choices on how and why we use certain tools, and for what ultimate purpose. Even when those choices do not seem to be made deliberately or explicitly, they are still being made. These choices are implicit in all the ways we organise and regulate social interactions, the economy and public life at different levels, as well as how far we allow intrusion into our private lives.

Where the previous contributions to this Think Pieces series gave valuable insights into specific aspects of how digitalisation is affecting international higher education, I would like to take a step back and share some more general thoughts and considerations on realities

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and assumptions underlying digitalisation trends in the higher education sector.

SOME DEFINITIONS

First, it would be good to refer back to some basic definitions and make sure that what we are talking about is clear.

Digitisation is "[the process of transforming from analog to digital form](#)". This seems straight forward. It's about creating digital copies or representations of objects, artifacts and resources, which exist in the physical world. When you are scanning old photographs or paper documents, creating MP3 files from LP records or creating 3D representations of archeological findings, you are digitising them, which in turn allows you to make them accessible to people worldwide, either for free or at a cost.

Digitisation clearly has enormous potential for education. Digital representations of objects, as well as information and resources of all kinds have become available in real time to teachers and learners regardless of their geographical location. Although there are often huge problems in terms of equity due to intellectual property rights and the business models associated with them, in general, this is a tremendous benefit for everyone involved in education. Nevertheless, it does require both teachers and students to be more alert and critical when it comes to authenticity, provenance and inherent bias, as well aware of the technical limitations of digitisation, which often result in an incomplete ('lossy') representation of reality.

When spreading and finding information and resources worldwide becomes incredibly cheap, fast and easy, intellectual laziness becomes a great danger. So the question arises if we are dealing with digital natives or digital naives.

Being hyperconnected does not automatically make someone a critical or efficient user of online resources. Making sense of the endless mass of resources available online, distinguishing between fact and fiction and sorting out reliable information is a challenge which will never be finished, both for teachers and learners. On the other hand, the endless stream of information can lead to a feeling that it is simply too much, an overload that one cannot deal with. This sometimes makes us go to the other extreme, trying to protect ourselves from the ever growing, threatening-looking digital world... 'Digital Detox' is a flourishing business.

Where digitisation is a process typically applied to objects and information, 'digitalisation' and 'digital transformation' are much more vague terms, commonly used to refer to fundamental changes in business processes and modes of social interaction. [Digitalisation then refers](#) to "the process of employing digital technologies and information to transform business operations", and the fact that "many domains of social life are restructured around digital communication and media infrastructures".

DIGITALISATION & THE CHANGING DEMANDS ON HIGHER EDUCATION

The fast and deep digital transformation of society and the economy which we have been experiencing, obviously has direct implications for higher education, in terms of the need to equip students with the necessary competences and literacy to become able and responsible citizens and professionals in this complex, digitalised, environment. 'Digital skills' are rightly high on the policy agendas as intended learning outcomes for education at all levels. The emergence of big data analytics and the increasing effect of algorithms and Artificial Intelligence on many aspects of daily life bring an urgent need for a critical understanding of these concepts, their real-world implications and, again, the societal choices they imply.

Besides changing the demands from society, digitalisation is also transforming the world of higher education itself. While for the efficiency of many types of business transactions the net effect of digitalisation is clearly positive, this deserves a lot more scrutiny when applied to the field of teaching and learning. The 'business' of transferring knowledge, skills and attitudes is unlike any other. Furthermore, dealing with young people who are still at an age when they are fully forming their personalities requires the utmost care to be taken. If we really want to put the learner at the center of our attention, it's good to have a look at some insights from human and social psychology.

A SUDDEN SHIFT

The years 2020 and 2021 provided a previously unimaginable real-life experiment in making a sudden and almost total shift away from face-to-face interactions to a life of communicating, teaching and learning through the barriers of screens, webcams and microphones. While at a superficial level it might have seemed that we performed amazingly well at finding quick and fitting

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solutions to most of the challenges arisen, it will be a long time before we can fully understand and assess everything that happened at a deeper level, during this experiment. Nevertheless, some of the outcomes are already shockingly obvious. A recent [report by the OECD and the European Union](#) shows that symptoms of depression have increased exponentially among young people between the ages of 18 and 29, much more than in any other age group. For example, in Belgium the percentage of young people dealing with symptoms of depression went from 9%, before the pandemic, to a peak of over 28% during the pandemic. Quite alarmingly, it is still at 23% today, many months after COVID related restrictions were lifted. In other countries we see similar or even more extreme evolutions: for example, in France it went from 10% to 20%, in Sweden from 14.8% to 38.5% and in Norway from 9.5% to 42.5% (!). In most countries the prevalence of depression in people from 18 to 29 years old is now double that of the general population.

What could explain this? What are the things we lost during the pandemic? Obviously, the mental health of young people was severely affected in many different ways during the pandemic: acute fear of getting seriously ill or even dying, of losing loved ones, financial problems in the family, general anxiety and desperation due to the whole uncertainty of the situation. Education could usually continue, to a certain extent, by quickly introducing 'digitalised' formats, however I believe the effects of the social isolation this situation brought were not always completely understood.

Indeed, I believe the link between mental wellbeing and social interactions is much more complex than we often think. We underestimate how important different kinds of social interaction, large and small, are for our mental health and how vulnerable young people are in the formative years, when they are typically in higher education. Prevalence of symptoms of depression is actually a severe underrepresentation of the negative effects of social isolation. Many more people who do not meet the definition of depression also experience different levels of negative consequences, so the problem is in fact even bigger than the statistics mentioned above suggest.

'BIG' & 'SMALL' SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

When we think about the social connections which were lost during the pandemic, we usually think about the 'big' relationships, which provide us with emotional stability and are the basis and the context for the main

events and evolutions in our lives: those with parents, siblings, partners, children and close friends. In the education setting, the 'big' relationships could be teachers and fellow students. However, interesting [research](#) shows that our happiness and wellbeing also depend on our 'weak ties', i.e. the 'tiny interactions' with vague acquaintances and total strangers during our most banal daily activities. The smallest, at first sight almost meaningless interactions, from exchanging a few words with a server in a coffee shop, saying 'good morning' to a fellow bus passenger, making eye contact with a passerby, or sitting together, even passively, in a lecture room, are all micro-rituals, which provide us with some sense of belonging to a community; a basic level of subtle trust in our fellow humans, which in turn contributes to a sense of wellbeing and self-confidence.

The cumulative experience of observing again and again that ordinary people around us share our basic concerns, react in the same way that we do or are not tricking us or stealing from us on every occasion, strengthens our sense of belonging to a community. Moreover, [research](#) shows that people who intentionally engage in more meaningful social interactions with vague acquaintances and strangers they encounter, like starting a casual conversation with a person on the train, actually feel more satisfaction and happiness from these interactions than they would from avoiding such contact. The interesting thing is that this is contrary to the expectations most people have beforehand. Most humans are notoriously bad at quick and subconscious estimations of probability, and systematically overestimate the bad things that could happen if they engage with strangers. They usually think that keeping their distance will be better for them, when in fact the contrary is true. "[Those who misunderstand the consequences of social interactions may not, in at least some contexts, be social enough for their own well-being](#)". Indeed, people don't always realise what's good for them and miss out on many potential moments of human warmth as well as small but meaningful opportunities for learning: "[we find that people systematically undervalue what they might learn in conversation, anticipating that they will learn less than they actually do](#)". Our 'social capital', both in the collective meaning, i.e. the strength of our social fabric, and the individual meaning of having the capacity to be a self-confident, successful and responsible member of society, is built through a multitude of daily social interactions, large and small.

COPING DURING THE PANDEMIC

During the pandemic the breakdown of our contacts

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with the people closest to us was immediately evident. When it came to these 'strong ties' we were often able to find adequate solutions to help us through this exceptional period, by using different communication tools, having online meetings and interactions, and so on.

For example, universities provided online tutoring sessions, buddy systems and mental health support, which was greatly needed. However, what was much less evident was the breakdown of the 'weak ties' mentioned above, and the implications this had on our mental wellbeing. These 'tiny interactions' were not usually on our radar as being important. In the case of students, this meant the various small and informal ways they could feel connected to their community of fellow learners. In a paper with the apt title "[I miss my friends, but I also miss strangers](#)", Michelle Anne Parsons writes that "loneliness is not just related to close relationships, cognition, conversation, or mutual understanding, but also material and physical places, things, and practices that convey a sense of social participation and belonging". The sense of truly belonging to a community is one of the most important factors for the wellbeing of humans, including students, and this feeling is built in many ways, which we are often not aware of at all.

All this to say that what is lost in a situation of advanced digitalisation of the teaching and learning process, i.e. massively "moving online", is difficult to capture and observe. The deep effect of human interaction often stems from what is going on under the surface, even outside the scope of our conscious observations; the things we lose without even noticing. From an evolutionary point of view, we need the subtle presence of 'friendly' others around us, providing emotional comfort and security.

THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF BEING A STUDENT

Whether or not young people, during those essential years they spend in the care of higher education institutions, can become happy adults and successful, self-confident and responsible professionals, depends on all of the different chances they get to develop themselves as social animals, both in their personal life and in the education process. This goes for both students in general and for students seeking to benefit from international experiences during their studies. The positive effects of international mobility as well as activities such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) come from the multitude of ways in which students interact with their teachers and with

each other, both inside and outside the classroom. It's as much about informal as it is about formal learning; learning what it means to be part of a group full of diversity and to be able to thrive in this setting. In its vision for a '[universal university](#)' the Centre for Research in Digital Education of the University of Edinburgh states that "new online teaching models ensure that distributed students stay connected and their educational experiences remain rich and experiential". I would argue that yes, rich 'virtual reality' can provide incredibly immersive learning experiences. But what about the experience of being bored together? Does 'virtual reality' really provide many opportunities to experience all those subtle, tiny but real human interactions that matter so much? Being aware of the limitations is essential in figuring out the best way to use digital tools.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT COMMUNITY

Taking a step back, we could see the whole pandemic experience as a prelude to what might happen if the current trend of '[unbundling](#)' the higher education process and making it more 'personalised' through advanced digitalisation, is taken too far: educational experiences tailored, often with a goal of being more inclusive, to the needs of each individual learner, allowing them to learn (digitally), when and where they want, combining micro-credentials and all kinds of individual learning experiences into their own personal path to a degree.

I think that when students no longer belong to a learning community composed of a cohort of students, who experience together large and small, planned and unplanned interactions inside and outside the classroom, severe unintended consequences can emerge, especially during those all-important and vulnerable years between the age of 18 and 24. The loss of belonging to a strong student community will affect emotional wellbeing, and will also weaken the '[socialisation effect](#)' of the university experience, i.e. all the subtle influences during this formative phase in life, which allow us and nudge us to become responsible and self-confident adults. Sadly, this loss would probably affect students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds even more than those students who are lucky enough to have various kinds of social exposure, both in their family lives and different social settings.

I believe that "learning together" is a very basic necessity, not only for mental wellbeing but also for preparing for professional life. Learning together by collaborating in varied groups, including diverse nationalities and



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cultures, but also with people with backgrounds in different scientific disciplines and having had different life experiences, is probably the most important competence a student needs to acquire to be ready for a professional life in which realities are more and more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous ([VUCA](#)).

Finding solutions will always require collaboration. Social skills, such as being able to relate to other people, showing respect, empathy and understanding, are the basis for self-confidence and for leadership skills. Being able to use digital tools well in collaborative processes is an essential aspect to be developed by every student. This can't be done without being aware of and valuing the importance of diverse forms of human interaction and the way they could be affected or even lost when communication happens (mostly) online.

CONCLUSION

Without doubt, the availability of digital tools provides immense opportunities for (international) higher education. When designing and using digital tools, it is easy to fall into the trap of focusing only on providing flashy solutions for the most obvious processes, which are quite straight forward to manage, observe and measure. However, it is critical to be aware of the importance of the wide range of human interactions, some of which are hardly noticed but are so crucial, not only for the mental health and emotional wellbeing of students, but also for their personal and professional development. Exploring the limitations of digitalisation, with an open and curious mind, and taking these limitations into account, is an essential part of creating a hybrid future in which students and staff in higher education can truly flourish.

This article is part of the "**ACA Think Pieces**" series on digitalisation, launched in March 2022. The contributions in this series explore the multi-faceted nature of digitalisation in higher education institutions from an international cooperation perspective. They take under consideration current challenges at various levels, local/national/regional and European higher education policies supporting digitalisation and practical examples of digitalisation infrastructures, effective support services for virtual and/or blended mobilities and development of intercultural competences in a digital environment etc. Articles are authored by expert colleagues on the digitalisation of HE field, and are published electronically on ACA's website, towards the end of each month, from March until the end of 2022.