Vesselina Valkanova
Professor,Dr.
Dean of the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication
Sofia University St. "Kliment Ohridski", Bulgaria

SOCIAL CHALLENGES, ACADEMIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY - STRUCTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Dear colleagues, it is an honor and a pleasure to be here today among you. Thank you for the invitation and for the opportunity to present here today some theses on the topic of Social challenges, academic and technological development in the 21st century - structural and educational transformations.

Deep public, social, political, cultural changes in post-communist countries naturally and necessarily include transformations that affect modern educational programs, and in recent years these changes include new technologies and the so-called "education for the information society".

Technological determinism, however, in many cases is not related to fundamental changes in structures, nature of learning and teaching. Therefore, despite the positive context of something necessary, better, the problem of inevitable transformations is very often associated with criticisms of practices and approaches to educational institutes.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Bulgarian academic and technological development is faced with a number of social challenges, structural and educational transformations. Higher education institutions are undergoing radical transformations driven by the need to digitize education and training processes. The university system strives to overcome this situation in order to be competitive and continue to provide high-quality education in the context of digital transformation and technological innovation.

Innovative academic education

The drive to improve the quality of education at the "unit" level, rather than at the "state" level, has forced institutions of higher education to constantly look for ways to improve the quality of education relative to their individual needs. The efforts to modernize learning and offer new standards for innovative learning, have resulted in:

- Development and introduction of new programs;
- Updating the content of the curricula, personalization of the content;
- Making efforts to modernize and renew the educational infrastructure and the material base;
- Introduction of new methods in teaching - inclusion of multimedia devices in the educational process;
- Use of interactive methods, active interaction between participants in the educational process;
- Conducting quality distance learning, organized in the conditions of the Covid pandemic and full lockdown;
- Initiation and holding of national and international conferences;
- National and international partnerships with other universities in order to exchange programs, students and teachers.

Distance learning

At the beginning of the 21st century, the development of technology marked its peak. New technologies increased the speed of working with information and provided the possibility of distance learning, something unthinkable until now. Alternatives to traditional face-to-face learning were provided.

The development of new teaching methods helps students to cope with the challenges they face. Efforts are being made in all spheres of technological learning so that even remotely (absent) they can receive knowledge and acquire skills no different from those acquired in the present form.

Despite the widespread opinion that distance learning lowers the quality of education, practice shows otherwise. Distance learning provides the possibility of physical distance, accessibility, inclusion of a greater number of learners, access to a greater number of resources and many more. etc.

Integration of digital technologies in media and communication education

I must highlight the flexibility with which the university responded as a system and how the partnership between departments and faculties contributed to overcoming the crisis and shock situation in which the epidemic placed us in March 2020.

It's about adaptation to a new environment - organization of schedules, principles and forms of conducting classes, exams, the reorganization of the administration and coordination between teachers and students.

In general, education in journalism and communications is oriented towards teaching specific knowledge and skills, combined with practical training, very important for the realization of students.

The various program-specific learning focal points, further divided into general and program-specific, were to be organized in an electronic environment, and the faculty, according to its specialization and attitude, was to direct all efforts towards offering full-fledged distance learning, by adapt the contents and break the methods through the functionalities of different platforms and thanks to specialized software.

The surveys conducted during the semester and at the end of the semester showed a general satisfaction of the students with the implementation of distance learning, although a more detailed analysis of the answers and recommendations shows that there is still enough room for development.

The system of quality criteria for e-learning

Sofia University has adopted a system of quality criteria for e-learning of a mixed type, thanks to the Center for Distance Learning.

The standards include criteria for e-course navigation, orientation and structure that frame course page navigation instructions, guidelines for supporting learners through forums and question-and-answer functionalities, the type of structuring of pages and approaches to the balance between learning resources and information to support learners, etc. related to the standards for visual design, part of the Quality Standards for Electronic Learning Resources.

A very important part of the standards are the learning content criteria, which require text and multimedia resources to support a better understanding of learning content, contents and teaching methods to ensure optimal interaction both between students and between them and the teacher; aligning the learning content with the timetable according to the curriculum and the ECTS credit system.

All this is related to the main task of the educational institution - that the quantity and quality of the educational content is sufficient to fulfill the planned online tasks and activities.

New technologies and lack of funds

It is almost impossible for the contemporary Universities to face the challenge of reaching 21st century technology levels in the education system worldwide.

In order to give a visible national impetus to the development of the digital and network university, large investments, solid structural development projects, participation in international projects are needed so that the

public university system, the university as a whole, individual departments and programs can develop into related fields of science, cross training centers.

Without the support of the states, foundations and funds, it would not be possible to create and implement projects on comprehensive digitization and building networks in universities.

Beyond any doubt, inter-university cooperation is very important, as any support for the development of (European) digital infrastructure.

The university of the future is the connected university, with inter-university use of the existing infrastructure, with the construction of effective systems for administration, control and digitized processes on them, with the removal of existing restrictions on the mobility of teachers and students, with the introduction of technological standards for functionality, availability and usability of resources and devices.

Obviously, the strengthening of the transfer of knowledge between universities, business and society will be on the agenda in the current decade, and openness in the field of science and research is being established as a guiding principle.