

## Moving Forward After COVID-19: New Directions for Teaching and Course Design in Higher Education

### Aller de l'avant après la pandémie de la COVID-19 : nouvelles orientations pour l'enseignement et la conception des cours dans l'enseignement supérieur

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Résumé de l'article

Cette étude détermine les pratiques de conception de cours et les stratégies d'évaluation qui favorisent une éducation de haute qualité, équitable et inclusive dans des modalités hybrides ou en ligne, tout en considérant le bien-être et la santé mentale des groupes étudiants pour la période postmandémique. Nos données se composent d'une analyse documentaire, d'entretiens avec des groupes enseignants et de groupes de discussion avec des représentants des services de soutien à l'enseignement et à l'apprentissage de cinq pays, le Canada, les États-Unis, le Royaume-Uni, la France et le Liban. L'étude informe le développement professionnel du corps professoral, recommande des éléments concrets de conception de cours promouvant une éducation équitable et partage des pratiques pédagogiques innovantes pour les contextes numériques.





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### Abstract

This study identifies course design practices and evaluation strategies that promote high-quality, equitable, and inclusive education in hybrid or online modalities, and that consider student well-being and mental health, for the post-pandemic era. Our data set consisted of an integrative literature review, interviews with instructors, and focus groups with teaching and learning centre representatives from five countries: Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Lebanon. The study informs instructors' professional development, recommends concrete course design elements that promote equitable education, and shares innovative pedagogical practices for digital contexts.



## Keywords

Course design, higher education, high-quality education, equitable and inclusive education, student well-being and mental health, online teaching, hybrid teaching, centre for teaching and learning, evaluation

## Résumé

Cette étude détermine les pratiques de conception de cours et les stratégies d'évaluation qui favorisent une éducation de haute qualité, équitable et inclusive dans des modalités hybrides ou en ligne, tout en considérant le bien-être et la santé mentale des groupes étudiants pour la période postmandémique. Nos données se composent d'une analyse documentaire, d'entretiens avec des groupes enseignants et de groupes de discussion avec des représentants des services de soutien à l'enseignement et à l'apprentissage de cinq pays, le Canada, les États-Unis, le Royaume-Uni, la France et le Liban. L'étude informe le développement professionnel du corps professoral, recommande des éléments concrets de conception de cours promouvant une éducation équitable et partage des pratiques pédagogiques innovantes pour les contextes numériques.

## Mots-clés

Conception de cours, enseignement supérieur, enseignement de haute qualité, enseignement équitable et inclusif, bien-être et santé mentale des étudiants, enseignement en ligne, enseignement hybride, services de soutien à l'enseignement, évaluation

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## Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted every aspect of teaching and learning in higher education, issues of equity, inclusion, and mental health emerged worldwide as never before (Aucejo et al., 2020; Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Essadek & Rabeyron, 2020; Hamza et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020). This revealed an urgent need to identify elements of course design and evaluation strategies that promote high-quality, equitable and inclusive multimodal education (HQEIE) that is sensitive to students' mental health.

### **Addressing Equity, Inclusion, and Mental Health Challenges During the Pandemic**

The pandemic laid bare the long-standing disadvantages faced by various equity-seeking groups of students. In the transition to online teaching and learning, many additional vulnerable groups were identified due to COVID-19 confinement measures (Naffi, 2020; "Universities tackle", 2023). These groups included students who were ill or stressed, those facing new challenges such as being the primary caregiver for children at home or caring for relatives with COVID-19, those volunteering in community centres, students with technology access-related issues or with inadequate technology literacy, students with low socioeconomic status, students facing financial constraints, and students in different time zones from those in which teaching was taking place (Naffi, 2020). In addition, physical or learning disabilities, ethnicity (Laurencin & McClinton, 2020; Wilder, 2021), sex and gender (Salerno et al., 2020), and immigration status (Firang, 2020) further exacerbated students' vulnerability during the pandemic. In some countries, such as Lebanon, the pandemic struck amid an economic collapse and problematic Internet connections, leaving students unable to pay tuition or access their online courses. (Baroud, 2020).

In fact, COVID-19 exacerbated the worst societal inequities, including digital inequalities (Beaunoyer et al., 2020) and systemic racism (Gavazzi, 2020; Mato, 2020). This situation was evident in student quarantine experiences (Casey, 2020). Some returned home and were able to continue working as they did before the pandemic, but others faced eviction from their university dorms (The Canadian Press, 2020), a lack of quiet working space in small apartments, digital-divide issues (internet speed, data limits, access to a decent computer) (Desrosiers, 2020), and the risk of unemployment. Many students found themselves in a serious financial crisis, notably international students who could not return home. In Canada, the House of Commons fast-tracked a process to pass the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB), a temporary financial program to support Canadian and permanent resident post-secondary students between May 10 and August 29, 2020, but international students were not eligible to receive this support (Canada Revenue Agency, 2020). Further, a study conducted by researchers from McGill University and the University of Toronto found that “universities [needed] to prioritize early prevention and intervention programming to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on students with increasing psychological distress, potentially stemming from increasing social isolation in response to the pandemic” (Hamza et al., 2021).

### **Redefining Quality Multimodal Education**

It became obvious to all that quality, equitable online education that also ensures social connectedness and good mental health amongst its students requires more than a sprint by tech companies to provide the necessary digital technologies (Naffi, 2020), and more so for emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020). In practice, this requires instructors to explore a wide range of pedagogical approaches and strategies. Bates (2019, chap. 12) posited that quality education refers to: “teaching methods that successfully help learners develop the knowledge and skills they will require in a digital age” (p. 478). Terosky and Conway (2020) established the student-teacher relationship as the primary determinant of a quality education, noting that quality education is driven by the ambition to bring about and instill change: “In short, a quality education prepares students for change, even as it, too, changes in seeking to meet this aim” (p. 442).

The massive shift from face-to-face to online course delivery caused by the confinement measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic prompted many institutions to revisit their definition of high-quality education, which was often assumed to be inherent in a face-to-face context. The new definition includes practices that are “student-centred, aligned with programmatic learning outcomes, accessible to all learners, and effectively designed and delivered” (Pelletier et al., 2021, p. 30). Mollenkopf et al. (2020) concurred with this view of quality education based on learner-centred teaching and support techniques, especially in the context of online education. These authors stated that:

Online learning requires instructors to actively learn about their students, match delivery modes to their needs, provide resources for learning that support student autonomy, make sure assignments are meaningful, offer students opportunities to improve and master learning, and provide clear feedback and positive interactions (p. 69).

Victoria L. Mondelli, founding director of the Teaching for Learning Center at the University of Missouri added that high-quality teaching should not only be evidence-based, but also inclusive and equitable (Pelletier et al., 2021).

## **Defining and Pursuing Equitable and Inclusive Education**

While UNESCO & Futures of Education initiative (International Commission on the Futures of Education [ICFE], 2021) defines equity in education as about ensuring fairness, where the education of all learners is seen as having equal importance, the OECD 2021 report focuses on ensuring that students' achievement of their educational potential is not the result of, or hindered by, personal and social circumstances, "including factors such as gender, ethnic origin, immigrant status, special education needs and giftedness" (p. 83), "bullying, sexual orientation (LGBTQI+), socio-economic status, migrant background, national minorities, indigenous backgrounds, and special educational needs (further divided into learning disabilities, mental disorders, and physical impairments)" (OECD, 2021, p. 147).

Equitable education embraces "humanity's many forms of knowledge and expression" (ICFE, 2021, p. 26), such as indigenous knowledge and learning systems, and responds to the realities and aspirations of the people and communities that hold and value these systems in all settings (ICFE, 2021). It seeks to identify inequities, interrogates and then dismantles the racism and systemic poverty that reproduce historical and persistent inequities in teaching and learning contexts by means of resources and support that address the specific needs of students (Gunder, 2021b). Its practices are incorporated in "teaching and learning, assessment, admission policy, discipline and expulsion policy, class composition, communication with students and parents, student support programs, work responsibilities or communication amongst staff, and school facilities or infrastructure" (OECD, 2021, p. 148). Beatty (2020) posits that equity in higher education requires that all students are given access to appropriate and effective learning opportunities – instructional resources, activities, interactions, and evaluative assessment – which are differentiated according to their unique sets of characteristics and needs.

As for inclusion, UNESCO defines it as "a process that helps overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of learners" (ICFE, 2021, p. 10). It aims to welcome and support each student in their diversity (ICFE, 2021; Neisler & Means, 2021) and states that "every learner matters and matters equally" (ICFE, 2021, p. 10).

Inclusive education is not limited to the inclusion of people with disabilities in a mainstream educational setting, but rather is a broader principle aimed at welcoming and supporting all students from diverse backgrounds, especially those who experience social isolation, which is in itself a consequence of attitudes and behaviours towards diversity of race, class, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, migrant status, and ability. Thus, the description of inclusive education is not one-dimensional, but multiple and varied (ICFE, 2021).

## **Promoting HQEIE: Responsibilities of Instructors and Teaching and Learning Centres**

Educators who take an inclusive approach create environments that reflect a broad vision of teaching and learning to meet the unique needs of all students (Loya, 2021). They are open to differences and welcome them in their classrooms. They encourage students to become creators and disseminators of knowledge (Loya, 2021). An inclusive-design approach to education is also based on the involvement of students and their experience in the co-creation process (Thomas & Bryson, 2021). According to Røe et al. (2022), "student centredness is a multidimensional concept that encompasses the involvement of students in course decisions (including the selection of content and assessments), in the development of learning skills, and in shaping the [higher education] teacher's role" (p. 2).

Although instructors are experts in their fields, many have not systematically developed expertise in teaching and learning, and very few instructors possess the needed skills in the research and practice that support online teaching and learning (EduTechnoPlus | TechnoEduPlus, 2020), let alone the ability to use digital technologies in their classrooms or to adapt their evaluations to online contexts in an equitable and inclusive manner while considering students' mental health. Yet, as the pandemic became the dominant reality, instructors invested unprecedented time and effort to transition their courses online to complete the Winter/Spring 2020 semester (Jelowicki, 2020). Unfortunately, several of the teaching approaches adopted by instructors worldwide were very similar to face-to-face approaches, and the assessment strategies adopted were generally poorly suited to a virtual environment. This prompted members of the academic community to debate the quality of education in a time of crisis and to coin the term *emergency remote teaching* (Hodges et al., 2020) as a common alternative term used by online education researchers and professional practitioners to draw a clear contrast with what many knew as high-quality online education.

Having gone through the course transition experience during the COVID-19 shutdown, many instructors engaged in in-depth reflection about the online learning experiences and evaluation activities they had reactively designed for their students (Verchier & Lison, 2020). Many also participated in a significant number of meetings and training sessions with teaching and learning centres to redesign the courses they facilitated during the pandemic. Some instructors had to become creative with the technology they had access to, in order to ensure the quality of the courses they facilitated (Casa, 2021). Éducation et Enseignement Supérieur Québec (2020), in collaboration with two colleges and three universities, created the open access online program "Making Learning Inclusive and Accessible," which presented strategies to build inclusive and accessible online courses, including the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. However, little is known about the context in which these strategies were mobilized, the factors that facilitated their implementation, or how they were experienced by instructors.

### **Investigating Promising Quality, Equitable and Inclusive Pedagogical Practices for the Global Digital Transformation of Higher Education**

The global COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digital transformation of higher education (Chyi, 2020; Grajek, 2020; Martin-Barbero, 2020; Pulsipher, 2020). It triggered a paradigm shift towards incorporating elements of online teaching. Established presumptions that face-to-face instruction is superior in quality to online teaching and learning have been challenged (Damm, 2020), and many institutions are re-evaluating whether the traditional physical co-presence is worth the cost going forward (Schwartz & Pope, 2020), given that incremental changes towards more hybrid and online learning are expected. However, a 2020 survey conducted by Universities Canada, an organization governed by a board of directors consisting of university presidents committed to the role of universities in reducing barriers to equity, diversity and inclusivity (Universities Canada, 2020), found that "77% of universities currently reference [Equity, diversity and inclusion] (EDI) in their institution's strategic plan or longer-term planning documents," yet there is a persistent lack of sufficient information on best practices for EDI in teaching and learning (Universities Canada, 2019). Therefore, there is an urgent need to document, analyze and share the pedagogical practices in hybrid, flexible, or 100% online modalities that proved the most promising during the crisis and that could be carried on post-pandemic to ensure equitable, inclusive and high-quality education for all students, no exceptions allowed, and to help build stronger, more innovative, and more inclusive societies.



This article shares the preliminary findings of a research project that investigated the elements of course design and evaluation strategies that promote high-quality, equitable and inclusive education (HQEIE), and consider students' mental health, in hybrid, flexible or 100% online modalities since the outbreak of the pandemic. More specifically, the objectives of the project were to 1) document instructors' practices and reflections on how their choices of pedagogical approaches and evaluation strategies contribute to supporting high-quality, equitable and inclusive multimodal education that considers students' mental health, and 2) investigate instructors' perceptions of the elements and factors that support the transformation of their practices. In this article, we first present the methodology we adopted to conduct the study; second, we share the results of the study that focus particularly on how instructors and leaders of centres for teaching and learning (CTLs) defined, i.e., perceived, high-quality education, equitable education, and inclusive education. This is followed by a preliminary synthesis of the practices they adopted to ensure HQEIE and the recommendations they proposed to design and support HQEIE for the post-COVID-19 era in various cultural contexts.

Throughout our project, we adopted Université Laval's definition of hybrid modality, which consists of two options: 1) face-to-face hybrid: a course composed, in variable proportions, of classroom sessions and distance sessions (synchronous or asynchronous) or 2) distance-hybrid: a distance course composed, in variable proportions, of synchronous and asynchronous distance sessions (Service de soutien à l'enseignement, n.d.). We also adopted Beatty's definition of flexible modality that focuses on learner choice, equivalency, reusability, and accessibility. According to Beatty (2019),

A Hybrid-Flexible (HyFlex) course design enables a flexible participation policy for students, whereby students may choose to attend face-to-face synchronous class sessions in person (typically in a traditional classroom) or to complete course learning activities online without physically attending class. Some HyFlex courses allow for further choice in the online delivery mode, allowing both synchronous and asynchronous participation (para. 1).

## **Methodology**

To achieve our research objective, we first conducted a purposeful literature review of scholarly articles and professional papers that focus on quality, equitable, and inclusive education in higher education, and student well-being and mental health. The review included scientific and professional articles and reports by renowned and credible organizations such as EDUCAUSE, UNESCO, OECD, the World Bank, and the World Economic Forum, published since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and focusing on high-quality, equitable, and inclusive higher education, in order to analyze and extract promising course design elements to be adopted in and adapted for the post-pandemic era. The results of the integrated literature review allowed us to define the concepts we presented in the introduction.

Second, we conducted 90-minute virtual one-on-one interviews with 23 instructors from 11 postsecondary institutions and five 120-minute focus groups with Centres for Teaching and Learning (CTL) leaders from 16 postsecondary institutions in five countries, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Lebanon, for a purposive sample to represent a spectrum of contexts that varied in the severity of COVID-19 pandemic outbreaks and thus public health guidance. This variation influenced educational institutions' decisions about teaching modalities and campus access. Given that our international research team members are actively involved in the transition and transformation of courses during the pandemic, our recruitment of instructors

began through a purposeful snowball sampling in their respective universities, followed by a call for participation through our Twitter and LinkedIn accounts and the listservs of professional organisations such as EDUCAUSE and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT). We also sought to recruit instructors from different disciplines (pedagogical needs vary and are often discipline-specific), at different academic career stages, and with different workloads, given that the support and resources for pedagogical innovation that instructors need or institutions provide also vary depending on instructor status and workload. As when recruiting instructors, we first targeted the CTLs operating in the educational institutions where our team members or participants worked, before using purposive snowball sampling. The size of the centres varied; however, to be included in this study, they had to be highly engaged with faculties and have access to the different approaches explored by instructors from different disciplines. To avoid any potential social desirability bias, no members of our research team participated in any interview or focus group that involved a participant affiliated with that member's institution. In addition, no members other than those who conducted the interviews had access to the identities of the participants, and certainly not the participants from their own institutions. Candidates who agreed to participate communicated directly and exclusively with the principal investigator, who presented the project prior to signing of the consent form, informed participants that their participation was voluntary, and explained the privacy and data management practices used by the project and approved by the Ethics Committee.

Table 1 lists the institutes of higher education represented in the study.

**Table 1**

*Institutes of higher education represented in the study*

Country	Institutes of Higher Education
Canada	Carleton University; Concordia University; HEC Montréal; McGill University, Simon Fraser University; Université Laval; University of Regina; University of Waterloo; York University
France	Groupe IGS
U.S.	Boise State University; Clemson University; New York Institute of Technology; The Evergreen State College; University of La Verne; University of New England
U.K.	Birmingham City University; Buckinghamshire New University; De Montfort University; Glasgow Caledonian University; University of Edinburgh; University of Glasgow
Lebanon	American University of Beirut; Lebanese American University

All individual interviews and focus groups were conducted and recorded virtually using Zoom. To transcribe the data in English, the researchers used Otter.AI, which is a speech-to-text transcription application. Two research assistants transcribed the data in French and then translated the transcription into English using DeepL, which is a translation system powered by artificial intelligence. The transcriptions were thoroughly reviewed and anonymized before being analyzed using the inductive approach outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), based on “three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification” (p. 10). We began by immersing ourselves in the data and then engaged in an open coding exercise as per Corbin and Strauss (2015) using MAXQDA, software designed for computer-assisted qualitative and mixed methods data. Open coding is “the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101). We then identified similar phrases, patterns, and relationships between concepts or



themes, and grouped those with similar properties. We isolated the patterns and processes as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), and ordered and reordered the categories until saturation, as suggested by Creswell (2008). We then proceeded to layer the themes by identifying the levels they fit into. The codes were validated by at least two coders.

In the following section, we synthesize the results that emerged from the individual interviews and focus groups.

## **Results**

It was necessary to establish how participants defined or perceived high-quality, equitable, and inclusive education and how they identified success criteria prior to any discussion of the teaching practices or the course and evaluation designs they adopted or supported to achieve these. The following paragraphs present the CTL leaders' and instructors' definitions of, first, high-quality education, second, equitable education, and third, inclusive education.

### **How did CTL Leaders and Instructors Define High-Quality Education (HQE)?**

Among the definitions of high-quality education (HQE) provided by CTL leaders or equivalents, two features stand out: 1) educating the whole person for responsible global citizenship and 2) addressing the personal and academic needs of students.

First, according to participants, HQE means “educating the whole person to prepare students to be critical thinkers, because they're the ones who are going to save this world.” HQE equips students to “deal with issues in the world and problems that might not even exist yet,” “to learn how to face the world, the world of tomorrow.” HQE is about guiding students and giving them the “opportunity to be ethical human beings, contributing members of society.” A CTL leader shared that HQE prepares an effective workforce; it is about the ability to graduate and to acquire transferable skills; it is about developing global citizens or, more prosaically, allowing students “to move up the economic chain.”

Several participants defined HQE as being flexible, international, decolonized, and incorporating lifelong learning. It adopts a learning perspective instead of a teaching one, shifts from a content-delivery model to a knowledge-construction one, collaborates with students and incorporates their lenses in designing their learning experience. HQE helps students develop both the soft and hard skills that will be expected from them once they enter the job market. It develops their creativity and prepares them to “be out of the box, to listen, to be involved.” HQE incorporates active and experiential learning. It “develop[s] learner agency” through authentic collaborative learning that weaves together theory and practice. It is a situation where “students are engaged, they're participating, ... they're involved, ... they're solving problems, and ... our faculty members and students are working as partners and collaborators.”

Second, CTL leaders agreed that HQE also presupposes an understanding of the students' real needs and goals, especially the real world in which they live. That world can encompass a wide range of realities, from “working three jobs, taking care of your siblings, helping to support your family, and figuring out how to have an education at the same time,” to “I'm gonna go on campus and this is gonna be the greatest time of my life. And it's gonna just all be fun.”

In the same vein, interviewees perceived HQE to be multifaceted, requiring high content-knowledge expertise, practice and preparation in advance, mastery of pedagogical strategies, ongoing formative feedback to students and from students, and meaningful relationships with and

among students. For participants, HQE involves placing students at the centre of the designed learning experience and equipping them for the future. It requires building engaging experiences, and inclusive and participatory journeys for them and with them and being available and responsive to them in moments of need. Challenging assumptions, asking questions, exploring the “how’s” are what instructors, very explicitly, are looking for in HQE, instead of “simply teaching [students] what to think.” Further, HQE “should be fun,” students “should enjoy it” and “look forward to coming to a classroom, real or virtual; they should leave a classroom, preferably with a bit of a buzz, or with thoughts in their heads, [...] maybe [about] something that they've never thought about before.”

While the CTL leaders’ and instructors’ definitions of high-quality education were aligned with the literature, there is a clear difference between how they defined the term and the definitions offered by Pelletier et al. (2021), ICFE (2021) and OECD (2021). These three organizations subsumed the aspect of equity and inclusion in their definitions while CTL leaders and instructors seemed to focus more on helping students become better citizens through improved pedagogy. This does not exclude equity and inclusion, but also does not put them at the forefront, so it was important to ask the participants to define these terms separately, as described below.

### **How did CTL Leaders and Instructors Define Equitable Education (EE)?**

When CTL leaders were asked to define equitable education (EE), they all agreed that a first key step is to “know who our students are, and, even if we don't, assume that they have a variety of needs, problems, issues, realities.” Several insisted on the importance of “decolonizing, de-whitifying everything [and] design[ing] our courses and our institution so that all students feel safe, and welcomed and secure” and, “starting to consider multiple modes of representation and multiple modes of expression and what that actually means in the classroom, a lot more choices and learning autonomy within courses.”

Further, CTL leaders stated that “it means that one size doesn't fit all.” One leader recalled Craig Froehle’s equity illustration with the children, the boxes, and the fence, to explain the difference between equality and equity. Another shared that his institution

adopted a definition from the American Association of Colleges and Universities, which is the creation of opportunities for historically underserved populations to have equal access to and participate in educational programs that are capable of closing the achievement gaps in student success and completion.

Similarly, one leader focused on “not seeing any difference in students’ outcomes” and others on access to financial resources, technology, and course content. Finally, one leader reminded the group that equitable education was not just about reacting to a problem, but about going to the source of that problem and addressing it from its genesis.

Interviews with instructors revealed that their personal definitions of equitable education were aligned with the OECD’s and Beatty’s (2020) definitions. Interestingly, instructors first mentioned what was not considered equitable education. For example, they shared that EE was not about “treating everybody equally” or about “everybody getting equal treatment.” One instructor explained, “Equality and equity, equal and equitable are not the same thing. It doesn't mean treating everybody equally, just to be treating everybody with equal levels of fairness.” Others emphasized that EE was not about lowering standards.

After sharing what EE “was not,” instructors were able to convey their EE definitions, mostly through describing concrete actions. For them, EE entailed being accessible and reducing barriers, as one instructor explained that “[e]quity can be determined by who's got the power to restrict (...).” It is about instructors “getting rid of unnecessary challenges or barriers” or “making them as minimal as possible” to give everyone the chance to learn and succeed. EE calls for tailoring to students’ needs and offering flexibility in how students achieve their learning goals, so “that they're able to do so, no matter their life circumstances.” It highlights students’ strengths and emphasizes reciprocity and relationships. One instructor shared that, in indigenous teachings for instance, “they talk about the idea of giving and taking and the idea of giving first. This is a relational thing to remind us to offer first, before we take from people.” This reciprocity can be achieved by “establishing relationships as quickly as you can find something that you can connect with the students” like a “handshake.” This means being willing to be vulnerable and sharing one’s own stories. Finally, EE “starts from a perspective of how we make this education fit [a student]’s life; not how to make [their] life fit the education.”

### **How did CTL Leaders and Instructors Define Inclusive Education (IE)?**

When defining inclusive education (IE), several CTL leaders brought up students’ diversity and their sense of belonging, in addition to the typical expected accommodations. As one director affirmed, “Inclusion always comes hand-in-hand with accommodations.” Diversity includes not only criteria related to students’ various socioeconomic conditions, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity but also students’ family and work situations. Interestingly, one director argued that inclusion also involves institutional and faculty understanding that not every student should meet the established measures. Finally, the leaders believe that IE means ensuring that students develop a sense of belonging to the community and feel welcome. This is consistent with the definitions put forward by ICFE (2021) and Loya (2021).

Concurrently, instructors defined inclusive education (IE) as education that empowers students; fosters a sense of belonging; connects with and recognizes everyone’s strengths; uses inclusive language, communication modes and strategies; highlights different perspectives; and incorporates students’ feedback and behaviours to continuously improve teaching. According to instructors, “[i]nclusive education is about empowering and enabling people to live their [personal and] professional lives that they want and can lead” and fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom where everybody feels “that they belong and contribute” and affirm who they are for “classroom acceptance.” One instructor shared that IE is also about connection and he referred to the circle teaching model, coined by Baldwin (2010). This metaphor of an inclusive circle puts everybody as equal, even if they have different roles and positions. It is a space where “everybody's hearts and thoughts are valid” and where “everybody has strengths.” Furthermore, these strengths are seen as gifts each person has to offer. Students must “feel appreciated, confident, called upon or brought into the course.” The notion of empowerment is echoed in the literature, especially when it comes to active participation as noted by Thomas and Bryson (2021), and with student-centred education as noted by Røe et al. (2022).

Instructors discussed the use of inclusive language as part of IE: using preferred pronouns, being sensitive to students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds when communicating, and making an effort to get their messages across clearly. Inclusivity can also be achieved through student representation and the images or videos that are used or produced for teaching purposes. Participants went further to include providing multiple perspectives or bringing broader examples and acknowledging instructors’ own biases. As one instructor pointed out, “[s]ome subjects are

going to be easier to be inclusive than others, and there will be cultural differences based on where the learning takes place in the world.” Nevertheless, in IE, instructors get to know their students and are attentive to their feedback and behaviours. One instructor noted that the concept of “one size fits all” is not feasible. Inclusivity is about “trial and error,” “never getting there completely” and “always losing something along the way.” Lastly, one instructor shared that “inclusivity is a goal we can't obtain, but one we have to continue working towards, because there's going to be continuously new barriers and we have to just keep working at doing what we can to remove them.”

Once definitions were shared and a common language was established, discussions with participants moved to extracting examples of actions they took, planned on taking in the future, or supported to ensure high-quality, equitable and inclusive education (HQEIE) that takes into consideration students' mental health. The following paragraphs present an overview of reported practices.

### **What Were Examples of Practices Adopted by Instructors to Achieve HQEIE?**

Participants shared several practices that they and other instructors have adopted to ensure high-quality, equitable, and inclusive education in their classrooms, while considering students' mental health and well-being. These practices included: 1) planning effective interactions with and amongst students, 2) being sensitive to students' situations, 3) making sure to answer students' needs, 4) ensuring accessibility of courses and resources, 5) exploring a variety of teaching approaches and strategies to ensure inclusive and equitable learning experiences, 6) ensuring targeted, equitable and inclusive evaluation of learning, and 7) continuously being reflective about their teaching approaches and practices.

In short, instructors planned for effective interactions with and among students through interacting in a humane way with their students, creating opportunities and spaces to exchange ideas among and with students, acknowledging what is happening in the world and how it might affect students, valuing reciprocity with students, and fostering a feeling of community among students. They made sure to be considerate of students' situations by warning them about sensitive topics, sharing mental health resources with them, taking initiatives to connect students with appropriate services on campus, being available to students and allowing for flexibility in meeting times and modalities, considering students' discomfort in the classroom, discussing options with students, and planning in advance for tough times during the semester.

Instructors made sure to know their students' traits, such as their cultural backgrounds, identities, vulnerabilities, and the disadvantages they are facing, to name a few. They investigated students' prior knowledge, or lack thereof, and were attentive to their reactions. The goal was to ensure a personalized learning experience that met students' needs.

Instructors considered that how they facilitated learning was a determining factor affecting the levels of quality, equitability, and inclusiveness in the learning experience. As a result, they explored a variety of teaching approaches and strategies, which included establishing ongoing communication channels with students, setting expectations from day one, discussing why a subject must be learned or a skill developed, challenging students, learning and employing innovative and engaging approaches supported by technology, using a variety of resources, providing real-world tangible experiences, including experiential work that fosters cultural learning, coaching students, offering constructive and formative feedback, integrating students' experience and representations into their teaching and materials, incorporating students' feedback

in their planning, highlighting students' strengths, creating opportunities for students to showcase their work inside and outside the classroom, utilizing breakout rooms and the chat feature to check in with students in real time, making the learning experience fun, and remembering that visuals matter.

Instructors employed four actions they regarded as mandatory to offer an equitable education to all groups, with no exceptions. These actions were 1) considering accessible open-source textbooks to minimize financial challenges, 2) offering flexible modalities so that students could choose how they attended classes or met instructors, 3) utilizing affordable, accessible and intuitive technologies to support flexibility in courses, and 4) allowing for alternative exams and other assessment activities, based on students' situations.

In fact, according to the participants, high-quality education goes hand in hand with high-quality evaluation of learning, which is targeted, inclusive and equitable. Many instructors adopted evaluation strategies that focused on knowledge transfer instead of knowledge evaluation. They stayed away from evaluation designs that required policing students as "policing does not prevent cheating; if anything, it encourages students to find better ways to cheat." Instead, they engaged students in authentic projects and innovated in the area of evaluation criteria. For instance, they took into consideration the way students worked in teams, their creativity, and their initiative, so "basically, you can only fail if you don't engage." Further, they allowed flexibility in assignment and evaluation modalities and formats, as well as flexible deadlines. One instructor explained that his evaluation focused on the degree of improvement shown by each student compared to where they started. Several instructors opted to hold reviewing sessions, to co-assess work with their students, to tailor exam designs to students' mental health situations, and sometimes to opt for evaluation with no score to help students feel more comfortable expressing themselves and completing the required tasks.

Finally, participants all agreed on the necessity of being continuously reflective about their teaching approaches and practices, asking themselves what worked, what did not, and why it worked for some students or in some contexts but not for others. Most instructors kept on improving their courses throughout the terms, as they attentively observed students' reactions, behaviours, question type and frequency, excuses, and engagement, to name just a few factors, and adjusted their courses accordingly.

## **Recommendations**

At the end of each interview, researchers asked instructors and CTL leaders to provide a series of recommendations to support high-quality, equitable and inclusive education (HQEIE) that considers students' mental health. Recommendations were sought at two levels: 1) for instructors and 2) for higher education institutions to better support high-quality education.

### **From Participants to Instructors**

In terms of recommendations for instructors, participants encouraged instructors to collaborate with their colleagues, to seek out experts with different perspectives, to engage with resources on campus, and to educate themselves about EDI and student well-being. They urged them to have realistic expectations about first attempts at teaching a course and to keep on improving and refreshing their courses, to have the flexibility to do things differently, to explore virtual international experiences, to create coherence with expectations in the workplace, to include content that is representative of students, to focus on the learners and their learning experience, to



move away from Bloom's (1956) framework of educational objectives and his revised taxonomy by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), toward critical pedagogy and student agency, to engage students in active learning, to provide a safe and ergonomic virtual learning space, to align their assessments with the learning objectives of their courses, and to redefine what is important and where learning takes place.

In terms of technology recommendations, participants invited instructors to consider the technology's affordances and their impact on students, as well as on their institutions and societies, to explore and experiment with existing and new tools, and to strategically plan the use of technology to best facilitate an inclusive learning experience. When it comes to the choice of technology, they suggested that colleagues seek common ground between themselves and their students. They also recommended anticipating technological issues in order to better plan for solutions, and enhancing community-building through creative use of technology. According to participants, technology can be worth the effort that instructors put into learning it.

Recommendations focused on instructor-student relationships invited instructors to consider student individuality. Instructors are encouraged to know their students, show compassion and respect, remember the impact of their words and intonations on students' self-efficacy, avoid false praise, show enthusiasm, be receptive to students, encourage student feedback, be present and build a reciprocal relationship with students, and most importantly, begin by communicating and discussing goals, priorities, and expectations with students.

### **From Participants to Higher Education Institution Leaders and Decision Makers**

In terms of recommendations for higher education institutions, participants encouraged these to adopt a systemic approach and an institution-wide HQEIE framework with well-defined data-driven policies. Breaking down silos and coordinating with the various stakeholders on campus is essential to develop a unified vision, shared goals, and concrete actions, supported by reliable and practical resources. Inter-institutional collaborations should also be established to enable the sharing of knowledge and resources on best practices in inclusive and equitable education, as well as cost sharing to support collaborative solutions.

Participants strongly recommended that higher education institutions promote evidence-based practices and avoid following trends whose effectiveness is not supported by research. They encouraged them to invest in instructors who are willing to explore or lead change, to recognize them as champions, to work with them and to give them leadership roles to encourage others to get involved. They also wanted to remind institutions that instructor perceptions of their role and their commitment are critical to achieving HQE. Nurturing curiosity rather than prescribing what to do, adopting a systemic approach to faculty development, providing access to and training in technology so that faculty can use it effectively in teaching and communicating with students, and ensuring adequate financial support and infrastructure for faculty to perform as needed are also essential. In addition, participants emphasized the need for higher education institutions to establish learning communities for instructors or create communities of practice for long-term change, while providing a supportive space for peer development; to give faculty the opportunity and time to reflect on their teaching; to encourage them to share restorative best practices that help students cope with stress; and to be mindful of their workload and mental and physical health.

Indeed, participants strongly encourage institutions to listen to their instructors, to value diversity among them, to appreciate the strength of each instructor, and to support individual choices about technology and the development of their technological skills. Gradual change should be sought to

avoid discouraging late adopters. As well, investing more resources and effort in broadening the dialogue within their community would allow for greater involvement of instructors who are interested but not yet on board.

Furthermore, participants advocated a programmatic approach to strengthen coherence within and across programs and to highlight several key points for achieving HQE: the importance of sharing concrete guidelines for implementing EDI in all course design, moving away from a culture of assessment to a culture of learning, and considering online learning modalities as integral to HQE.

Most importantly, participants urged institutions to get CTLs more involved in decision-making about teaching and learning, to require annual reports on HQE efforts, and to include equity in the annual evaluation of instructors and support staff. Finally, they strongly encourage institutions to celebrate the efforts, accomplishments, and successes of support staff, instructors and CTLs in achieving high quality, equitable and inclusive education that is sensitive to students' mental health.

## **Conclusion**

This article offered pivotal insights into 1) how CTL leaders and instructors defined HQEIE and 2) concrete actions to design and support inclusive online and hybrid educational experiences that champion student well-being and adopt evidence-based educational practices. This topic is an under-studied area of research, one that the pandemic provided a unique and global opportunity to investigate. It is at the heart of two future challenge areas identified by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC): "Working in the digital economy" and "Humanity+." The knowledge it generated can have a direct impact on instructors' multimodal teaching as well as on students' academic success in a time of crisis and transformation and contributes to the success of digital transformations in both educational and societal contexts. The concrete recommendations that the study pinpointed can be transferred when creating learning experiences to teach, train, upskill or reskill the current and future workforce for the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, while considering the mental health issues expected to arise in the digital economy.

What does this mean for CTLs and for anyone who teaches in higher education? Simply that high-quality education must be intentional because it is not just about high-quality content delivery. For instructors to focus on the development of the whole person towards responsible global citizenship as well as addressing students' personal and academic needs, they must be supported by teaching and learning services that can provide frameworks for such course design. If students are to become critical thinkers and responsible citizens, and engage in lifelong learning opportunities, universities need to be places where students can take risks and feel a sense of belonging. For universities to be welcoming places and to respect diverse needs, they need to be places of kindness, where mistakes are opportunities to learn, where human limitations are respected and working to exhaustion and performing to the maximum despite personal problems is not glorified. Only then can we truly focus on enabling all students to become better, fully fledged, ethical, responsible, contributing citizens. It should be noted that the data collection was completed before the widespread public adoption of ChatGPT and the emergence of similar artificial intelligence tools such as Google's Bard and Microsoft's Bing, which are forcing the reinvention of education as a whole. It would be pertinent to explore how the definition of quality, equitable, and inclusive education is evolving in this disruptive context, and what practices are being created to ensure it.

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