

THE THIRD LEONIDAS DONSKIS MEMORIAL CONFERENCE
"MIND THE GAP: EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL SOLIDARITY
DURING COVID-19"

The Global Initiative on Psychiatry (FGIP)(<https://www.covidandmentalhealth.eu/>) and Vytautas Magnus University have initiated the international campaign Mind the Gap, which asks the public to replace the term “social distancing” with the more accurate “physical distancing,” and, most importantly, to take care of people who lack social interaction, including people with disabilities or mental health issues and the elderly. An international campaign is meant to raise awareness, to provide documents, visuals and videos, and to support fund-raising and networking activities.

In Lithuania the campaign focuses on two issues: opposing the concept of social distancing and promoting physical distancing instead as well as countering social isolation and promoting social solidarity. The activists of the campaign are particularly keen on the mental health of the student community, as students find themselves in limbo, having their future plans messed up and foreign students finding themselves in an unknown country where they are severely restricted and thus have a double consequence of the lock-down restrictions. Evidence shows that the mental health effect on people in general is much bigger than anticipated, but the younger generation has an extra burden in that their lives are disrupted at a time when they should be building their future, going out and meeting people, finding partners, etc. VMU is aware of the problem and seeks to use its international network to develop a platform where these issues can be discussed, researched, and countered. (<https://www.vdu.lt/en/science-and-society-after-the-pandemic/>)

The campaign was introduced during the Third Leonidas Donskis Memorial Conference “Mind the Gap: Emotional Well-Being and Social Solidarity during COVID-19” at VMU, organized by the Andrej Sakharov Research Centre for Democratic Development and FGIP on September 21, 2020

(<https://www.vdu.lt/en/mind-the-gap-an-initiative-asks-public-to-join-and-raise-awareness/>). Below is the speech delivered by the vice-rector of VMU, Prof. Ineta Dabašinskiėnė.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,

There is no way to deny that Covid-19 pandemic is a great challenge on a scale that is hard to imagine. It affects all spheres of life on various levels. But in each crisis, there is a possibility not only to find something that helps us to overcome the challenges we face, but also to create something that allows us to grow in a variety of different ways.

***The Mind the Gap campaign** has allowed us to see how careful we must be with our words and the meanings behind them. Used without careful consideration, they can push people already at the margins of society even further backwards.*

The pandemic has serious consequences for the younger generation as well, those who are now part of our constituency. In the short term their career prospects have been rather shaken, but in the long term they are looking at a world that might be quite different from the one they saw when they first planned their future. This uncertainty has led to increased levels of anxiety and depression, but also to a wish to understand what is happening as an essential precondition to future planning.

This is highly relevant, as the pandemic uncovered a lot of problems that have been neglected during more tranquil times: how conditional and flawed certain democratic processes are, how the systems of healthcare and human rights are ill-prepared to deal with large-scale challenges or offer specific urgent solutions, how political leaders are inconsistent in their approaches, and how people fail to understand their own personal responsibility in the big picture of things.

Universities carry responsibility on so many levels as well. Not only as institutions of research and science, educators of young open-minded clear-thinking people, but also as actors of the society at large. More importantly, they need to consolidate their potential to deal with large-scale issues at hand.

A great way to embody the power of this message occurred in the context of another initiative that encourages European universities to form powerful transformative alliances. VMU belongs to one of them, the alliance “Transform4Europe – T4E” that unites seven universities from across Europe in their attempt to create one joint sustainable European University and provide both students and lecturers with wider opportunities in the global and digitalized world.

The partners of Transform4Europe have therefore created a strategic and sustainable alliance to educate highly motivated and skilled European knowledge-entrepreneurs: agents of change with the interdisciplinary, digital, multilingual, and intercultural competencies needed to contribute to and shape upcoming transformation processes in Europe and beyond.

Recent years have witnessed a lot of discussions about what the future of education is supposed to be, but the global pandemic has exposed that the theoretical level of these discussions is no longer enough if we want to ensure a true university education in its diversity and relevance. We need not only to create new forms of study and research and to develop new mobility concepts, but also to find a way how we all, teachers, students, and others will interact in order to ensure the humanistic approach over the technological.

*As one of the ways to contribute to this dialogue, VMU initiates a special **Mind the Gap University Platform** that could be developed with a broader focus on **social solidarity and emotional well-being**.*

The platform invites the European Universities to collaborate and foster changes in several aspects: first of all, the situation calls for a careful analysis of what happened, of the challenges the pandemic has triggered for democracy, the integrity of personal space, EU collaboration and integration, and of the role of the current superpowers in the world that is now being created; we need to study and discuss the conceptions and perceptions of normality, non-normality, and new normality.

The pandemic has resulted in a lock-down of half of the globe's population into emergency measures of varying degrees and in restrictions on movement both internationally and nationally, which exposed the vulnerability of youth as a group.

The platform will emphasize the importance of dialogue and youth engagement in rebuilding a cooperative, peaceful, and diverse Europe; it will try to enable the voice of youth, to foster taking personal responsibility for the future, to gather peers and build a sense of community for Europe enthusiasts. It will particularly focus on the emotional well-being of the academic community, especially students.

With the scope of the areas of life COVID-19 affected, the platform might naturally develop and incorporate new topics. The main principle, however, is to remain reflexive.

I believe that just as in any other difficult situation in history, together we can accomplish even more.