

## EDITORIAL

### **THE CHALLENGE OF OUTREACH AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN TIMES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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In December 2019, the Chinese government reported that there were 27 cases of people affected by an unknown virus and who were suffering from acute respiratory syndrome; later confirming that they had a working relationship with the exotic animal market in Wuhan. This event marked the beginning of the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic that is impacting the whole world, not only in the health area, but also in the social, economic and emotional aspects<sup>(1)</sup>.

In Chile, this virus enters our borders on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, when the first case was detected, causing the transformation of daily activities due to lockdown measures and social distancing. Homes were transformed and became our workplace, the children's school classroom or the university classroom for young people. Meetings with our family and friends are no longer outdoors or in some public place, but rather through the screens of communication devices<sup>(2)</sup>.

In this context, the University of Concepción was not left out of this process, and had to continue with the development of a great number of its activities, now remotely, using the telework modality to maintain different areas of the university work: undergraduate and postgraduate training, research, institutional management, as well as outreach and community engagement activities.

Outreach and community engagement are a fundamental university function, since it allows the relation of the institution with the national and international community, developing activities from and towards the community, that help orientate the population regarding different aspects. This contributes effectively to achieving presence and visibility of the university's work<sup>(3)</sup> because outreach and engagement activities help develop genuine contact with the community, establishing links that favor closeness, communication and the necessary feedback to implement projects and offer advice from the academia, thus providing solutions to the many problems and challenges.

But how do we develop outreach and community engagement activities in times of pandemic? How does the university, committed to its social responsibility, achieve the necessary impact to support the community, even in times of crisis? These are questions that cannot be fully answered in advance, but it is possible to look for strategies in order to continue with the tasks of informing, educating, supporting and protecting the entire community in times of pandemic.

In the last months, technology has become an essential tool of communication in different activities; and in Chile, while the use of platforms and videoconferences has increased by 80%, the Internet speed has also decreased, revealing a technology gap, in some sectors, due to economic causes or life in rural areas, which prevents maintaining an adequate connectivity service and access to information, educational content and government benefits<sup>(4)</sup>. Despite this, technology and the use of virtual platforms have contributed to the people, who have required support due to its social isolation, in areas such as education, the purchase of basic products, socialization with family and friends, customer service, health and teleworking<sup>(5)</sup>.

Educational institutions have expanded their technological networks to cover the countless activities and demands that need to be developed at a regional, national and international level, and the University of Concepción has been facing this considerable challenge, which is gradually being transformed into institutional growth, because the use of ICTs and the expansion of the use of virtual platforms are available now to the entire university community, enabling close contact between different working groups and students.

These communication platforms have been essential for the continued outreach and community engagement activities, especially in the Faculty of Nursing. As an academic unit dealing with the health care of the population, outreach and community engagement are fundamental for maintaining social responsibility and commitment on a continuous basis, and especially in this context of national and global health crisis. For this reason, from the first day we had to stay home, the faculty concentrated its efforts on undertaking different activities that have strengthened its outreach and community engagement potential, becoming an unquestionable contribution in times of pandemic.

Many activities have been carried out in recent months, aimed at vulnerable risk groups such as people with chronic diseases or others as relevant as caregivers of older adults, children or the disabled. Faculty members themselves have been the protagonists of different forms of virtual outreach and community engagement activities: information videos, synchronous conferences, talks, counselling and training in local media such as newspapers, radio and television. There has been an important collaboration with health facilities, which have been offered courses aimed at health professionals, who have become part of the front line in the new or reconverted hospital units, and who needed to provide safe care and attention in times of Covid-19. Moreover, the use of social networks such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter has been promoted to disseminate, for preventive purposes, relevant information on data, figures and educational aspects of SARS-CoV-2.

This pandemic, which has caused an unprecedented health crisis and for which there is still no end in sight, has impacted the most vulnerable populations who cannot access virtual media, and our country, like many others, was not prepared to meet these demands. Nevertheless, crises can always present an opportunity and what has been implemented in recent months at the University of Concepción and the Faculty of Nursing shows that it is possible to follow new paths and provide new educational tools for the community.

It has been important to understand that, in order to maintain outreach and community engagement, on-site activities can be transformed into virtual communication activities that can also be accessible and serve the needs of the community. In the context of the health crisis, these efforts are more valuable than ever, and must be multiplied<sup>(6)</sup>.

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