

Understanding the Contribution of the A4A Approach to Higher Education



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Abstract This chapter aims to explore the actor-for-actor (A4A) logic supporting recent changes occurred within higher education institutions (HE), in light of the changes brought about by the recent digital revolution underway, partly accelerated by the recent Pandemic of COVID-19. The work starts from an analysis of recent advances in the literature on the theme of relationships between actors, and on a possible contribution coming from a systems perspective to identify what are the distinctive elements of a digital re-configuration of HE as inspired by A4A. The key elements of A4A are defined herein and applied to the new HE value proposal with evidence of aspects related to contents, conditions, opportunities, fulfilment, embeddedness, exchanges, self-feeding development. The HE Management can take advantage of the considerations set out here and also know how to look at mixed, perhaps modular, solutions that can respond to the changing needs of the varied users.

Keywords A4A · Higher education · Digital re-configuration · System thinking

1 Introduction

Education all over the world has been experiencing very intense transformation processes in recent years, mainly due to the continuous technological development, comparison with international standards and the need to adapt the training offer to the changing needs of the users.

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University education (also called Higher Education—HE), in particular, has been affected by profound regulatory changes and a consequent reorganization of administrative procedures, methods of transferring content (teaching modules), staff management hinged, the ways of interacting with students.

At the same time, in Italy, an alternative has been added to the more traditional university (public or private), consisting of telematic or online universities (e-univ.); a growing phenomenon, undoubtedly competitive, which aims at a defined target and which has proposed a series of innovative solutions relating, in particular, to the methods of teaching delivery.

The educational offer of the on-line universities can represent an interesting case study in terms of value co-creation, especially following the difficult pandemic period that has occurred worldwide due to the spread of the Corona Virus and the related COVID infection -19. This unprecedented condition has forced the entire academic world (and beyond) to quickly adapt its value proposition, taking its cue from the typical organization of online universities.

For traditional universities this type of digital re-configuration is articulated, unedited and not easy to frame; to analyse it, here we propose the use of an equally innovative approach, connected to recent advances on the theme of value co-creation and based on the integration of systemic reflections with an interpretative matrix more focused on the service: the Actor-for-Actor approach (A4A).

Based on the main definitions developed in the literature, we speak of A4A logic when “there is a mutual interest in shared action, there is mutual participation in the activities of others, empathy takes on a role, there are non-opportunistic and non-opportunistic behaviours speculative, there is a high sensitivity to collective satisfaction, the alignment of strategies in the programming phase is growing, commitment and self-involvement are the basis of every interaction, there are a certain awareness and a clear will on the part of the subjects to be involved” (Polese et al., 2017b, 2018d). From this it follows that in A4A exchanges the value is inevitably co-generated, the contribution is multi-part, and, to facilitate the co-creation process as much as possible, organizations tend to adapt by constantly re-configuring themselves, with the Consequently, the survival of an organization is closely linked to its ability and propensity for change (Barile et al., 2012a, 2012b, 2012c).

The relationships between actors in value co-creation processes are also discussed in terms of supporting competitiveness because these represent a useful and innovative approach to tackle the changing and difficult to manage dynamics that characterize the markets of all sectors (Polese et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). The A4A approach has been used to explain new phenomena in very different sectors, such as retail, agri-food, Healthcare, Tourism, production in general.

Moving from these reflections, this contribution aims to deepen the A4A logic as an innovative and supportive approach in the HE sector, to answer the following question:

- *Can A4A represent a distinctive element for the digital re-configuration of the HE?*

This work starts from an analysis of recent advances in the literature on the topic of relations between actors, on A4A and a possible declination from a systems perspective (par. n. 2); subsequently, this survey perspective is applied to the HE sector through the particularly pertinent (but still little explored) example of the on-line universities in Italy (par. n. 3), to identify the key practices of an inspired HE re-configuration to the A4A which (par. n. 4), seems to have become necessary by now and which, also, for this reason, deserves to be deepened. The work ends with the identification of the main managerial implications (par. n. 5) and the first conclusions (par. n. 6).

2 Reference Framework: The Actor-4-Actor Approach

Studies on the concept of the actor within a market, a supply chain or a single company appear useful to analyze the dynamics of individual behaviour and those of context. According to recent advances in Service Research, attention to the relationship between actors often prevails over the role of the latter; following this approach, what would be relevant in business studies would be only the actual existence of an interaction, redefining, at least in part, the traditional concepts of B2B, B2C, C2C (Gummesson & Polese, 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2011).

The vision of the Actors as recognizable entities during the process of providing/using a service was developed over 30 years ago (Solomon et al., 1985) and led to the identification of the customer as a leading actor. Over time, the concept of customers/actors has further expanded; by simple evaluators of the quality and satisfaction of the value proposals, they were perceived as 'participants' in the production and supply phases (Williams & Anderson, 2005) and, more generally, as an active part of the value creation (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Recently, the focus has gone beyond mere customer/supplier collaboration, towards a multi-actor network vision of co-creation of value in service contexts (Chandler & Vargo, 2011; Fyrberg Yngfalk, 2013). After the introduction, in the context of Service Research, of some conceptual categories of systems thinking, we also moved from an individualistic view of individual Actors to a holistic one of groups of Actors organized according to a zoom-in logic/zoom-out (Lusch & Vargo, 2014), according to which all the actors engaged in the same activity, integrate resources in an almost always collaborative way (Peters et al., 2014).

According to Vargo and Lusch (2016), the value, in this sense, is always co-created and always by more actors, which means that a single actor cannot provide value in itself, but can only participate in the constitution and the offering value propositions; in this way, more importance is given to the action of an individual/organization (especially when this action is shared) than to its framing within a given context (Koskela-Huotari & Siltaloppi, 2019; Taillard et al., 2016; Tronvoll, 2017); from here, the inter-organizational relationships can be interpreted with a generic A2A, as proposed for the first time by Vargo and Lusch (2011), where what matters is the

“2” (read as to, not as two), or the link existing between the parties, which generates bi-directional interest in a common action based on a common goal.

The importance of the role (also strategic) of the Actor is also confirmed by the studies of Crozier and Friedberg and by their reflections on the Social Actor (1980), according to which the actors are not only mere performers but always have a personal margin of execution with interests not necessarily in line with those of the organization to which they belong. The Social Actor has specific functional skills, a certain mastery of relations with the environment, a strong ability to communicate information, and deep knowledge of organizational and operational rules (Crozier & Friedberg, 1995). At the same time, however, their flexibility cannot be said to be absolute precisely because it is the organization that defines the reference framework. In the organization, there are other actors, with ability to interact, influence and condition; also in this, therefore, the importance of facts and actions is highlighted, not as such, but because they fall into a context.

This vision complements the Weberian classification of social action, which distinguishes the four types of action (i. Rational concerning purpose; ii. Rational concerning value; iii. Affective expression of a need; iv. Traditional anchored to rooted practices), based on oriented awareness and reactive behaviours, which however take into account the situation as it is defined by the Actors, given the knowledge they have and the point of view they adopt.

These considerations can be compared with the postulates of the Viable Systems Approach (VSA), which qualify each system according to its purpose (Barile, 2008; Golinelli, 2005); according to the VSA, in fact, the will of each entity, understood as a system, to survive in its context of reference guides its behaviour (Barile, 2009). Using the VSA interpretative key, all relationships between individuals and organizations (including A2A) take on the importance not for the intrinsic value of the relationship that binds two subjects (actors), but rather for the motivation that drives individuals or organizations to act; in this sense, each subject plays a (variable) role in a given context according to the specific objective that it aims to achieve from time to time (Barile et al., 2012a, 2012b, 2012c; Carrubbo et al., 2012). The same person, therefore, can appear as supplier or user or intermediary depending on the type of transaction that concerns him and which is analyzed, as well as depending on the moment and context in which it is observed (Dragoiccea et al., 2020).

A recent conceptual advance on A2A proposes to change the 2 to “4” (read as for, not as four), thus giving rise to ‘A4A’ type relationships (Polese et al., 2017b, 2018d), in which the mutual interest of subjects, involved in the same process and oriented towards mutual satisfaction, leads to long-term relationships, and which leave no room for opportunistic and/or speculative behaviour (Badr et al., 2022). The A4A focuses precisely on the motivational or otherwise deriving aspects of systems’ dynamics such as pro-activity, the convergence of ideas and values, shared intentionality, equality, cognitive alignment, integration of resources, emergency and viability (Polese et al., 2017a).

These ‘specifications’ deserve further investigation and explanation; the VSA meta-model can help us to further develop the salient features of the A4A and the

so-called ‘for’ logic, thanks also to the use of the dichotomies expressed by the VSA FCs (Barile & Polese, 2010a, 2010b; Polese & Di Nauta, 2013; Wieland et al., 2012).

Starting from what has already been defined/published previously, below we try to outline the systems characteristics of the A4A:

- *Actors ‘engagement*. In addition to the common interest, the term A4A also defines a common commitment to carry out activities for the benefit of all, in a logic of systemic consonance and resonance (VSA FC n. 7) which is based on pro-activity, positive energies, on the will to work together, on mutual loyalty, on widespread quality, on the sustainability of relationships (Díaz-Méndez & Gummesson, 2012). Being able to enhance the static relationships characteristic of belonging to common structures allows you to benefit from dynamic interactions typical of the systems that arise from individual and collective action and that give value to the exchange of resources (Alexander et al., 2018; Brodie et al., 2019; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Storbacka et al., 2016). What emerges is a shared system of values, an interrelated system of actors, a living and evolving system, whose boundaries are dictated by behavioural dynamics and are not pre-constituted (Barile et al., 2012a).
- *Actors ‘relationships* (and win–win logic). The commitment underlying everything is not necessarily a consequence of external stimuli or incentives; the commitment is often due to the personal belief of wanting to do well. I participate because I share its usefulness, I interact because I have an interest in it, relationships (and exchanges in general) are always and only bijective. In this sense, one can think that inter-systemic relationships in such a context are not only A2A, that is, to do something towards someone else, but also to consider A4A relationships, or to do something for someone, for the benefit of someone, in the interest first of all someone else. The win–win logic is best expressed by a relationship “in favour of” (Badinelli et al., 2012; Pels et al., 2014; Polese et al., 2017b). From this point of view, the concepts of co-creation, sharing of resources, equifinality take on a different, deeper, more direct meaning (Carrubbo et al., 2022).
- *Subjective awareness*. With the A4A approach it also becomes easier to understand that you are part of a whole, in which each organization is inserted (or rather immersed, entangled, enmeshed) in its context, as subjectively perceived, as a function of the extension of the relationships activated with the various actors more directly involved in the same value generation process (VSA FC n. 9). In this sense, it is possible to define a particular ‘social individualism’, based on the recognition of a shared purpose among the actors, in which the ECO version prevails over the EGO version (Barile et al., 2013a, 2013b; Iandolo et al., 2018; Polese & Carrubbo, 2016), in which awareness of the collective utility of one’s contribution (of information, resources, results) contributes to improving the system as a whole.
- *Shared Intentionality*. With the A4A approach, individualism leaves room for more collective collectivism, enhancing the collective intentionality, the iterative paths, the shared purpose: the Community above all. Collectivism involves interested behaviour, if inserted in a community, this concept describes the situation

in which people can find the point of reference in institutions and recognized lifestyles the sense of aggregation (Giddens, 1984). In A4A, the systemic consonance between Actors is understood as a “condition” or a status parameter that can arise from changes in the individual information variety and represents the compatibility existing between a given subject and the supra systems with which it interacts. The shared purpose allows to transform consonance into resonance (Barile et al., 2012a), harmonizing objectives, aligning perspectives, perfecting processes, optimizing the use of resources, ultimately obtaining better results (Bratman, 1987).

- *Finality alignment.* Each actor usually operates following his interest (such as competitiveness for business organizations) to survive in the long term, but when immersed in a given context, his individualistic behaviour, however competitive, does not concern exclusively selfish purposes (Henderson & Venkatraman, 1992), as the awareness of being “part of” leads to a different and not opportunistic way of doing (VSA FC n. 2). In A4A, the commitment does not only concern a generic psychological involvement of the actors; it also identifies the intention to share a purpose to be pursued in a specific way, with certain personal participation and support. When there is a high sensitivity to collective realization, the alignment of strategies in the planning phase increases, as does viability (Barile et al., 2012a, 2012b, 2012c).
- *Resource integration.* Through a strategic behaviour of aggregation, integration, cooperation, work can be carried out more efficiently and effectively and the objectives can be achieved with greater satisfaction than that which can be obtained independently and, above all, of common benefit. This approach, if carried out systematically and consciously, can favour more global governance, which enhances resources and relationships, and promotes essential synergies for the survival of a system, especially of an enterprise system (Barile, 2008). By pursuing the A4A philosophy, there is an incentive, in this way, to make available what you have (information, time, experience, skills) with a view to full sharing.
- *Emergence in action.* The feeling that is generated also depends on the structural compatibility between the subjects involved and on contextual situations (VSA FC n. 6). From an A4A viewpoint, in every dynamic system the balance once achieved is maintained with repeated behaviours, which is a certain sense constitute the historical memory of the interaction and which are not cancelled out on the occasion of the modifications that may in the meantime take place (Watzlawick, 1976); an interactive system does not start from scratch every time but maintains the cyclically acquired achievements even when it must seek other balances (Watzlawick, 1976). This, once again, leads to a spirit of constant adaptation (structural and systemic) and therefore is the result of a continuous and continuously stimulated reasoning (VSA FC n. 10).

These systems reflections can again be associated with the concept of Social Actor (Crozier & Friedberg, 1995), since the action of any subject often draws inspiration from an inspiring principle, capable of accelerating a latent trend or already

in action, or stimulate towards a more or less profound modification of organizational relationships and even of value categories (as occurs in innovative processes). All this, however, must always be analyzed based on the presence of field forces, which sometimes limit, sometimes fuel, evolutionary processes and contribute to understanding the reasons for the success/failure of a given action according to the consonance that each Actor has with its context of reference (Walleztký et al., 2020) and the convergence between its variety of information and the resources available in given space–time (so-called ‘context consonance’).

Thanks to the key elements so detailed it is possible to proceed to model an original interpretative framework and analyze complex and stimulating phenomena for business science scholars. In particular, it is as if we were witnessing a cyclical development, in which the involvement of the Actors is (or may be) growing and, subsequently, feeds the development of ever new and common interest interactions (as indicated in the following figure, see Fig. 1).

In detail, we can speak of A4A relationships when an Actor (somehow interested in a given situation or an exchange and with a role, whatever, in the context of reference) feels involved and ‘engaged’ in a given relationship (step n. 1) and in some way expresses its will to be part of it. Once this ‘connection’ has taken place, it is possible to witness continuous interactions, activated thanks to the harmony between the parties (step n. 2). Working in a context populated by other actors, whose behaviour directly or indirectly influences (on the other hand in a reciprocal way) the work of others, allows to acquire the right awareness of being part of a whole (Granovetter, 1985; Parsons, 1971) (step n. 3). At this point, empathy and trust encourage involvement, nurture harmony and bring goals closer (which, in this

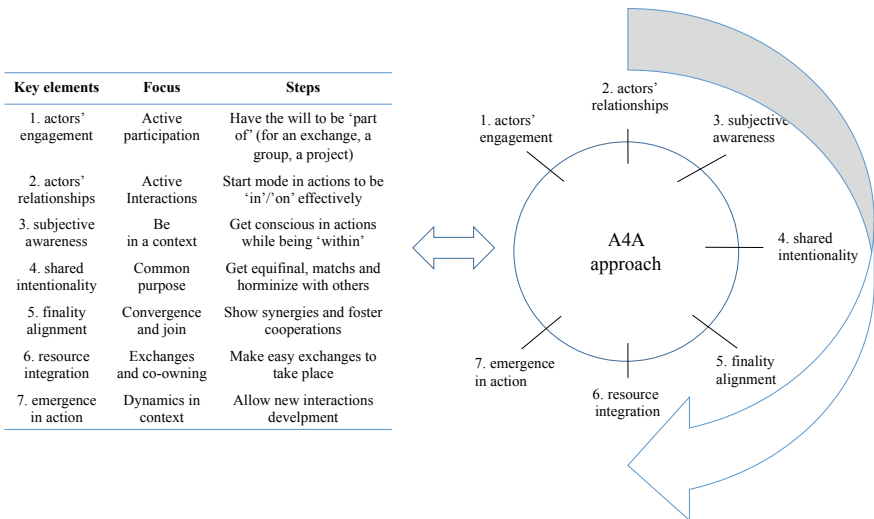


Fig. 1 How the A4A approach can qualify the action of competing systems. *Source* Authors' elaboration (asvsa.org)

way, become common) (step n. 4). This allows cooperating in a more convinced and happier way, with mutual satisfaction (actual or latent) and important and desired margins of collective growth (step n. 5). This positive condition is the foundation for any form of exchange and the sharing of resources deemed most critical and strategic (step 6). By continuing this type of dynamics continuously, a virtuous circuit is sustained which can be sustainable and long-lasting (step n. 7).

From value co-creation, all this means being in tune with the other and in this way trying to overcome some classic structural difficulties that prevent the right dialogue; this type of synergy represents one of the most powerful accelerators of competitiveness (Pels et al., 2014). The involvement in defining the characteristics of a solution to be proposed on the market, for example, actually improves the satisfaction of its future users and allows you to launch a positive message of participation and openness that is always highly appreciated (Barile et al., 2018, 2019).

Not everything is positive, not everything works, not everything resists over time. As in the case of value co-destruction (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011), A4A relationships can also fail; having correctly set up an approach, involvement and cooperation strategy may not be enough; the reason why we initially cooperate could fade over time (as happens in dispersive systems), therefore, also, for this reason, it is important not only to be aligned when starting an A4A relationship but also to find and renew stimuli right for a long-term talk.

3 The Focus on HE, an Interesting ‘Ground’ for A4A

3.1 HE in Italy, the Growth of On-line Universities

Nursery, primary, secondary, university and post-graduate schools represent a multiple and varied scenario. Each of these areas of education is characterized by a variety of specific problems and issues that underline their diversity while highlighting traits that can be considered common.

The recent digital and technological revolution, which has affected many aspects of everyone’s life, has had an impact that can be defined as disruptive on the methods of delivery and use of training courses and has brought with it the need to review and update some of these (Ciasullo et al., 2021), consistently with renewed teaching models (Ciasullo et al., 2016).

The perhaps most significant example, in this sense, comes from the academic world in which, in recent times, we have witnessed the birth and growth of on-line universities, private organizations that, in the wake of the new opportunities offered by technology, have designed a new way of providing and using university and post-university education.

In Italy, the presence of the on-line Universities, now recognized by the Italian Minister of Education (MIUR) and in the phase of full national official accreditation, is increasingly significant, with important data in terms of new enrolments,

several teaching staff and widespread presence on the national territory. In the 2013/2014 academic year, the 11 recognized on-line Universities registered almost 40,000 students; ten years earlier, immediately after recognition, there were less than 1,500. There has been an annual growth rate of 16.9% for over 15 years, and it is estimated that for the 2019/2020 academic year the on-line Universities will be able to count on over 75,000 total enrolled students (CENSIS database, 2019). The profile of the students of the online universities is well defined; according to MIUR official data (2017 data) 9% of these students are under 22 years old, 25% between 23 and 30 years old, 29% between 31 and 40 years old, 37% over 40 years old. Therefore, a large part of them is over-30, an age in which an average person has already graduated (Italian Almalaurea 2019 report on the 2018 financial year).

The main characteristics of this type of university education can be associated with a very flexible training offer and administrative organization and, therefore, potentially more suitable for users who live, on the contrary, less or less flexible working conditions (for those who already work), special conditions linked to residence (perhaps far from the larger urban centres where traditional universities often have their headquarters), or severe disabilities. Therefore, not an audience made up only of young or very young (digital natives), but people looking for an alternative, who may have already experimented with the most classic academic path and have not considered it suitable for their needs, or have been forced to stop and then resume it (years later) in different ways.

By exploring the websites of the various Italian universities, it is possible to make a first comparison of the main characteristics that distinguish the traditional University's value proposition from that of the on-line/telematic University (see Fig. 2), which can be made based on (i) registration fees, (ii) lessons, (iii) types of studies, (iv) social background, (v) exam preparation, (vi) assessments, (vii) graduation.

Comparative elements		Traditional University	Telematic University
Registration and annual fees	→	Lower and variable costs	Higher and less variable costs
Conducting lessons	→	Constraint on specific locations and times	Freedom of study and attendance
Types of studies	→	All degree programmes	Limited degree courses
Social environment	→	Real moments of aggregation and social comparison	Virtual moments of aggregation and confrontation
Self-preparation	→	Independent study	Independent and assisted study
Assessments	→	Exams in place	Exams in place
Graduation		Recognized qualification	Recognized qualification

Fig. 2 Comparing value propositions. Source Authors' elaboration (asvsa.org)

The model common to all on-line universities provides a ‘tailor-made’ offer, totally modular and adaptable according to the specific needs of each student. Enrolments open all year round, exam sessions every month, multi-channel customer care, ad hoc training programs, are distinctive elements that differentiate the on-line University from the current traditional University; to this must be added the proximity, i.e. the widespread presence in the territory guaranteed by the many physical locations open by every single online university, and the continuous investments in qualified/current educational content, in collaborations of international relevance and the third mission (especially with project initiatives co-financed aimed at overcoming the ‘digital divide’), as well as the innovations of the ‘immersive reality’ (to encourage the student experience), the ‘collaborative teaching’, the ‘virtual presence’.

The motivation that favours this approach in on-line universities—especially concerning the last points—is mainly attributable to the desire to overcome the prejudice of being seen as ‘easy’ choices, with ‘simple’ exams, with ‘facilitated’ courses.

Nevertheless, the criticisms are still numerous, and sometimes even very harsh, both by public opinion and by authorities responsible for surveying (statistical and not only) the university situation in Italy (such as the CNVVSU of MIUR). We often speak of ‘early graduates’, ‘loopholes’, ‘generous teaching’, ‘modest variety’ (in terms of degree courses), ‘still insignificant numbers’ and not comparable with similar realities foreign, of ‘structural weakness’ (linked, for example, to the methods of recruiting teaching staff). Besides, Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) excludes, from most of its analyzes of university basins, students of telematics concerning the themes of ‘mobility’, of ‘density by residence’, of ‘differentiation’ of the educational offer, this at least until 2017.

In any case, the e-univ. it presents factors worthy of being studied also for those traditional universities that aim to update their value proposition and to appropriately re-configure themselves concerning the current world health situation; the post-COVID-19 scenario suggests finding valid alternatives to the methods used so far, with particular reference to the relationship with the recipients of the university training offer, that is the students. Being able to improve online teaching in the various moments of interaction (comparison, sharing, dissemination, evaluation, etc.) will serve to remain competitive even in the future and, not least, to be correctly identifiable, recognizable, distinguishable.

3.2 An A4A Approach to ‘Read’ the Digital Re-configuration of All Universities

Analyzing the value proposition of on-line universities, one cannot help but reason about the business idea behind it and the development of a new way of doing university. Investments are needed in infrastructures, in communication, in technologies, in accreditation, in professionalism, which corresponds to performance assessments,

predictions on returns, analysis of the quality of the processes put in place and the level of expected results, all in compliance with new managerial models, almost unedited for the world of education, in order to make the proposal much more sustainable (Díaz-Méndez et al., 2019).

Recent pandemic events have forced us to make new choices in all sectors, including in education and, in some cases, have entailed real upheavals. The A4A approach, as described, can facilitate a clearer interpretation of the emerging value proposition of the current traditional University (of the one already in place and the one being trained), which certainly started from some best practices of the Universities telematics, but which has progressively and quickly traced a new path by integrating its distinctive mark, and, also for this reason, in part, in any case, freeing itself from them.

First of all, the actor engagement (step A4A n. 1); a more engaged, intrigued, stimulated, and interested student is the first step towards the co-creation of value and, to obtain it, one must, first of all, enhance the functionality of a digital platform:

- Once the decision to enrol has been made, the student has to face a well-established multi-level access system, thanks to which:
 - know the different curricular profiles,
 - select the one you are interested in and have access to various types of services, such as the status of your career, the payments, the exam calendar, the active chats, the historians that can be consulted, the marks obtained for each module studied, the gaps detected in its preparation, the documents available, the imminent obligations, any shortcomings to be remedied;
 - download the audio–video material of each lesson at any time and on all existing devices on the market (in addition to the written content made available for each course);
 - book exams, pay fees, confirm the mark on electronic shirts, share virtual comparison spaces (for theses, traineeships, receptions or other), reducing expectations, errors, duplications.
- The engagement does not only concern users, but in full A4A spirit, all the actors of the new proposal; in this way, the student can:
 - interact with the teacher in a scheduled and on request (always digitally);
 - count on a greater number of exam sessions and multiple locations, a call centre for the necessary clarifications and coordination staff;
 - being able to reduce transportation costs, costs for misunderstandings, costs for delays (in a word, non-quality-costs);
 - increase the moments of interaction, albeit remotely, as is also the case in the various didactic, departmental, thematic, restricted, extraordinary, planned or occasional Councils which engage the teaching staff and the administrative staff in an even more intense way than before.

In addition to creating the ‘space’ (structural aspect), the digital re-configuration also passes through the activation of continuous interactions (systemic aspect), which

‘approach’ the user despite the distance (step A4A n. 2) and feed the potential of this type of training offer given the widespread awareness of living in a digital age (step A4A n. 3).

- Chats, blogs, virtual classrooms to attend compulsorily and with different ways of controlling/monitoring access and activities, as well as repositories, databases, self-assessment tests of profit and evaluation of the service received (all almost always in both synchronous and asynchronous mobile mode) are all distinctive elements to be enhanced. The new concept includes:
 - teaching methods inspired by the concept of ‘augmented teaching’, based on which it is possible to follow the video footage of the teacher (taken in a suitably isolated environment, and followed by dedicated audio–video professionals) who explains a slide and simultaneously view the content of that slide as if you were in presence, with the particularity of being able to re-listen it infinite times without, therefore, losing anything of what is said; this also in cases of numerically much larger classes than the traditional ones.
 - the personalization of the training and teaching content, in terms not only of portability, which is favoured by the historical moment, in which users are generally accustomed and available to actively participate in the contexts they live in, also through technological and digital interfaces.

Having clarified the more operational procedures, to co-create value from an A4A perspective, it is also important to spread a corporate culture in which to recognize oneself, especially in terms of shared objectives (step A4A n. 4).

- Advertising promotion, the importance given to loyalty, customization, feedback, as well as orientation to the Market are currently only ‘borrowed’ elements, but they help to explain some fundamental aspects:
 - why so much is invested in orientation and placement, now also remotely;
 - because it is preferred to lose the copyright on the teaching material (which becomes the property of the University or the platform manager) due to the greater possible dissemination for those who have regularly paid their fees;
 - so that the recording phases of the teaching material can follow precise radio-phonetic fees, sometimes even taking hours to record a few minutes, between cuts, repetitions, improvements, assemblies, etc.;
 - because we take care to define efficiency indicators, inadmissibility thresholds, digital presences and relative times;
 - because the data collected are connected to the parameters already in force for the evaluation of the activity of the hinged (e.g. Italian performance indexes, like VQR).

Furthermore, the digital re-configuration favours the formation of a Community, in which one ‘wants’ to take part, where the Actors live together with a new way of doing University, sharing its spirit, values, philosophy (step A4A n. 5).

- All universities are called to recreate entirely new educational and social environments that represent the training base of tomorrow’s ruling class:
 - The limits of co-presence and contemporaneity can be overcome in favour of e-learning and the related methods of use, which facilitate autonomy, flexibility.
 - Direct contact is very limited, a social and no longer social logic is followed, in which comfort and virtual applications become central elements. In addition to group discussions or projects, the cohort format is proposed in some universities, which allows you to complete your degree as part of a group, building on a network of collaborations for the entire degree program.

As it is designed, this scenario can facilitate the exchange of resources and each actor acts as an integrator; everyone makes data and energy available, everyone can benefit from it, but above all everyone is informed and available (step A4A n. 6).

- Users actively participate in the exchange, make their time, funds, feedback, self-evaluation results, participation in common areas, information for learning chat-bots available.
- The data must be able to be collected, analyzed, classified and used to improve the service.

Active participation and user involvement, in this sense, can certainly contribute to improving the training experience as a whole and to bringing the offer to the next level (step A4A n. 7).

- The sustainability of an offer of this type requires the right affirmation and the solution of critical issues; the education sector is experiencing a highly critical period as a whole, often linked to collective disinterest, as well as the perception of a misalignment concerning the transformation of our society; a situation from which to emerge strengthened to lay the foundations for lasting success.

4 Discussion

According to the A4A approach, the continuous ‘exchange’ between Actors pushes towards an overall vision that goes beyond the integration of resources. User, Providers and connection tools become indistinct during the interaction.

The acceleration, previously discussed in terms of social action, which favoured the ongoing evolution, was mainly due to technology, widespread, understandable, in some ways democratic and, above all, truly aggregating. Technological advances have made it possible to change the underlying bureaucracy and to build new hierarchies with renewed binding capacities and more adherent to the historical period we are experiencing.

The user today is ready for the ‘transition’ discussed so far, the digital re-configuration seems a natural passage, or at least it may not be indicated as a shock; it represents an evolution in line with technological progress, a progressive, inexorable phenomenon, exactly as there is to expect it to be today; it expresses a new

way of working, of interacting, a way more appropriate to the time in which we live and which gives the impression of being able to grow further as a result of the use, exchanges and feedback previously described. All this is possible thanks also to a conceptual revolution in management processes, today much more than before, supported and in some ways guided by programs, procedures, coded procedures, automated, trainable, summarized with the term algorithm.

The algorithms represent the new (more automated) conventions that guide the behaviour dynamics of all the actors involved in a given process; the algorithms seem to replace the old concept of liturgy to lead it towards a new frontier of interaction and, this phase of such profound change, can represent one of the main levers of sustainable development.

The re-configuration of the value proposal described helps users (but also providers) to be more active, informed, aware and supports them in small and large decisions (Napoletano & Carrubbo, 2011), showing a type of accompaniment that is at the same time non-invasive, but omnipresent. With a view to the quality of the service rendered in a free market (as it seems to have become that of HE today), in which the presence or reduction of students affects the performance indicators of a university, where the number of graduates per year or the CFU disbursed it is an indicator of quality (even before quantity), it all seems more plausible, acceptable, almost desirable, so much so that even important universities of international level have started e-univ spin-offs. with high expectations of competitiveness, to cope with an emerging phenomenon so relevant, that they could not fail to consider.

Problems, misunderstandings, unfulfilled expectations, lack of clarity or will also contribute to failures and crises, destroying value in the same way in which they co-create it (Carrubbo et al., 2017). The non-speculative, mutually beneficial, non-opportunistic approach of active participation, in a word A4A, therefore becomes an increasingly important factor for competitiveness, also for the HE and, for this reason, it is the subject of so much attention and investment for its development.

The existence of consonance between Actors facilitates the implementation of those (necessary) 'changes' useful for developing resonance between the system being observed and the context in which it is inserted. As for the physical law of universal gravitation, according to which each material point tends to attract every other single point with a force exerted along the intersection line of both points, so for the consonance, understood as a measurable attraction force, it is possible to distinguish between:

- Field strength, which affects the masses with the same initial conditions and without particular external influences (as occurs between masses on the same plane) and acts on the value categories, and is an indication of consonance.
- Impulse force, which, on the other hand, conditions the interactions between masses in the presence of contingent factors (as occurs between masses in an inclined plane or concerning the pendulum pivot) and is considered as a variation in the consonance (index of relevance) upon arrival of new elements/possibilities.

The impulse, in this case, is given by the condition of a global health emergency, the opportunity is 'accelerated' by technological progress, the effect of the digital

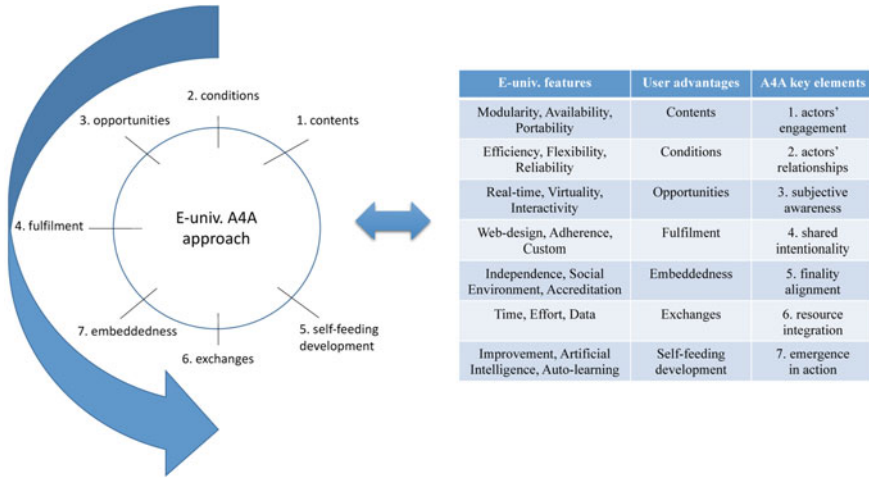


Fig. 3 A4A, distinctive element for the digital re-configuration of the HE. *Source* Authors' elaboration (asvsa.org)

re-configuration in progress, the ‘context consonance’ supports the diffusion among users and suppliers of a shared vision, which for the reasons detailed above leads to an interpretation of the dynamics observable according to the A4A approach.

All this leads us to think that the answer to our Research Question is affirmative, because the A4A logic seems to be a distinctive element for the digital re-configuration of the training offer of the more traditional universities, as schematized below (see Fig. 3).

In detail, with the same cycle-based sense previously represented, it is possible to re-follow the various steps A4A as follows:

- In compliance with the A4A paradigm, as seen, the first approach to users must be linked to the method of transfer and sharing of contents (contents, step n. 1) to establish contact, to engage the recipients of the proposal of value through the digital functions described, able to guarantee modularity, availability and portability.
- Starting from here, the new model shows a thousand ways of relating, highlighting the advantages and the advantages of a continuous interaction (conditions, step n. 2), above all in terms of efficiency, flexibility and reliability.
- Subsequently, it is what enables users to ‘live’ newly created contexts that conquer them and stimulates them to ‘participate’ (opportunities, step 3), exploiting the benefits of virtual applications and enhanced interactivity.
- At this point, adherence to individual needs and the possibility of providing a customized, almost personal, training experience more closely related to current needs, well express the common interest of all the actors involved (fulfilment, step n. 4).

- The sense of aggregation, community, recognizable and integrated facilitates collective action and feeds synergies (embeddedness, step n. 5), also under increased interdependence and widespread accreditation, leading to continuous sharing, and formation of new institutions and, therefore, of new resources (exchanges, step n. 6), previously identified in time, info, data, effort.
- Finally, the continuous process of self-learning, self-improvement, shows us the self-nurturing process of growth underway (self-feeding development, step n. 7).

5 Managerial Implications

The new challenge that Italy has experienced in 2020 with the epidemic spread from COVID-19 has put the Country and the university institutions in front of an unexpected condition, at times difficult to manage, especially from the point of view teaching. This led, and in some ways obliged, management to make unpublished decisions, a real digital re-configuration, stimulating the use of alternative tools (distance lessons with numerous students, on-line meetings, competitions via Skype, Department and Academic Senate Councils operating on co-working and smart-working platforms provided by Google or Microsoft). A moment of a shock compared to the normal performance of the activities, which however opened up to functional and effective solutions, although not already tested (certainly not at that level).

Universities, therefore, had to face a complexity never experienced before and have experienced the advantages of a new model that would have allowed them to obtain further advantages, which could be added to the positive aspects already consolidated with the traditional approach.

This, in some way, shows that the management of the HE must also know how to look at mixed solutions, perhaps modular, which can make the most of possible with the changing and changing needs of the varied users to whom it offers its value offer. Management must be able to change, adapting but also anticipating new conditions, contingencies, situations in A4A, showing itself ready, competitive and viable especially in the long term. This does not mean losing identity, but rather wanting to strengthen it in an always different and current way. Those who have the task of making decisions for the traditional University will be able to take advantage of this moment to complete their evolutionary path, enriching their value proposition, in an attempt to fill the gap, at least in the organizational context, illustrated with the online universities and (in if you succeed) put yourself as the first alternative also towards new target users.

We are still in a phase of strong transition, the challenges of the future, however, already stimulate the creation of new value proposals today, whose success will be determined and shared only tomorrow; in this sense, the growing presence of algorithms in our lives will continue inexorably and will force us to adapt again the interpretative models of the context dynamics and consequent behaviours of the Actors operating therein. Not only that, in the future, the algorithms could support the improvement of the quality of the educational offer, with indications on the

levels of attention of the students, or of interest compared to what communicated by the teachers, as well as the real-time decision support to all the others comparison activities, which can also induce consonance between Actors.

6 Conclusions

According to the A4A approach, each actor acts functionally and efficiently, for his objectives, also through the development of specific innovative processes, inevitably contributing to the improvement of the quality level of the system as a whole, to the development of new procedures, to the creation of innovative communication systems or data management, promoting up-grade or radical change tools (e.g. digital re-configuration), stimulating/supporting the systemic growth, as it happens in HE.

Likewise, in compliance with the principles, previously highlighted, of belonging and collective interest (ECO), consonance/resonance and empathy (always in A4A style), all the Actors must be more aware and actively involved in the choices and not be simply and passively governed. In this case, the effort to combine timely planning with the need to be emerging can be the right way to find a dynamic, collegial, changing balance, but still a balance. Understanding all of this in itself is already a positive aspect that can contribute to greater collective consideration, can bring demand and supply even closer, make them interact and understand each other, the value today is also this.

This contribution has focused on more or less known aspects, on derived, secondary information has not yet been subject to empirical tests or evaluations in the field. Given, however, the interest and topicality of the topic, it is believed that there are now the elements to set up a specific Research model for analysis, even quantitatively, of the phenomena observed.

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