

BRIEFING

European higher education in the Covid-19 crisis

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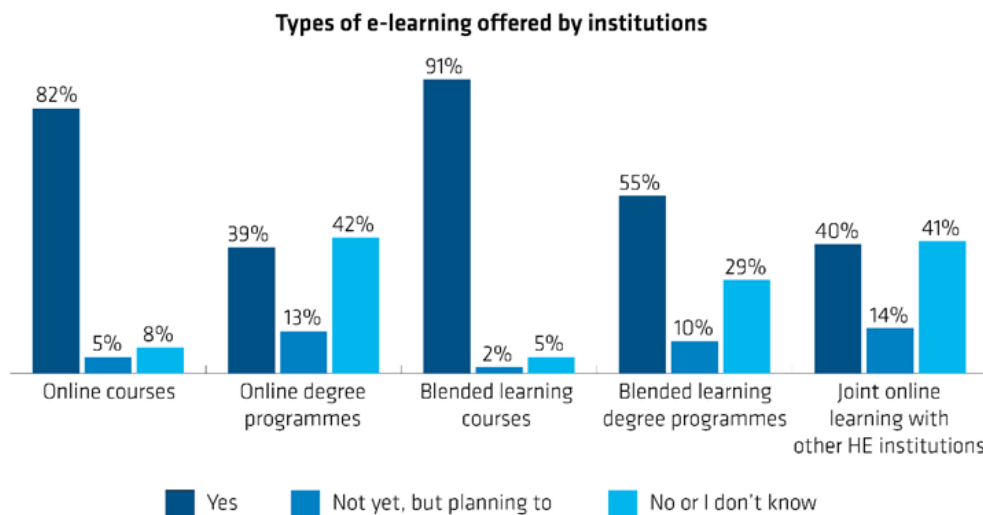
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A sudden shift to emergency remote learning and teaching

The vast majority of European universities closed their campuses in March 2020. Confirming the IAU survey findings, the European University Association (EUA) survey on “Digitally enhanced learning & teaching”¹ affirms that 95% pivoted to distance learning throughout the institution, while 4% provided it in some faculties.

This sudden and disruptive shift to remote education varied by size, governance models, and disciplinary differences. Large comprehensive institutions usually found it more challenging to develop an institutional approach. Depending on the governance model, at some institutions, individual faculties and departments have had their own approaches. Disciplines that require lab work, practical experience, and external collaboration, were more difficult to teach remotely.

Another factor that matters is how much digitally enhanced learning provision had been provided hitherto. Already, a 2013 EUA survey (see figure) showed that practically all higher education institutions offered some kind of digitally enhanced learning, and more than half offered, or at least had planned, online degree programmes.



Other reports² confirm that over recent years the overall acceptance of digitally enhanced learning and teaching in higher education had grown, but also that many institutions were still planning to develop a more systematic and strategic employment of digitally enhanced provision. On the eve of the crisis, most institutions (80%+) indicated that they had in place online repositories for educational materials, a centre or unit that supports teachers on digitally enhanced learning and teaching, as well as digital skills training (EUA 2020). These capacities may not have been sufficient for the suddenly increased demand, and not all staff and students were familiar with them. The [Irish National Digital Experience \(INDEX\) Survey](#) indicates that 70% of academics had never taught online pre-crisis, with similar figures in the UK. There is no reason to believe that experience levels were different in other European higher education systems. In this regard, 2020 was a year of change: There have never been so many students and staff exposed to online learning and teaching. This may well be a historic opportunity to make a major leap in terms of digital take-up, as well as a general transformation of learning and teaching. Despite the related challenges and stress, this also explains why colleagues devoted to learning and teaching have been quite positive about the

¹ EUA 2020 - The survey was conducted under the EC funded DIGI HE project, and will be published in autumn 2020 at www.eua.eu. Some preliminary results are available at [BFUG Meeting 71 June 2020 - Survey results](#).

² Trends 2015, Trends 2018, The Changing Pedagogical Landscape

developments. The vast majority of institutions indicate that they have plans beyond the crisis to explore new ways of teaching (87%) and enhancing digital capacity (70%) (EUA 2020).

The point has been frequently made that what has been provided was not distance learning, but emergency remote provision. While the ad hoc provision of online education certainly had its shortcomings, interestingly, surveys run by higher education institutions, but also by student unions, confirm that this worked relatively well and that the majority of students and staff was reasonably satisfied.³

While the overall situation is new, many of the challenges were existent before, and have been amplified and magnified. For example, autonomous learners may have coped well with working remotely, while students with learning difficulties may have been overwhelmed. The crisis also aggravated the digital gap, in that not all students had access to technology and highspeed internet. Many socially disadvantaged students became even more so during the crisis, and their numbers have likely increased: Around 40% of students had to interrupt their jobs or lost them and consequently have been dependent on family support. The crisis also confirmed the university as a physical place with students, in particular, missing the social experience. All this required a reflection on how student services, counselling and peer support can be provided remotely.

To abide by physical distancing measures into the next academic year, most institutions would only be able to have one-third or less of the students on campus at a given time. This needs diligent planning and instructional design, with the best possible use of “face time” for students and teachers within the limits dictated by institutional infrastructure. For the online provision, a balance will have to be struck between synchronous, which students and probably also many teachers seem to favour, and asynchronous provision, advisable from an organisational and educational point of view. Over time, this should result in better quality of education that fully considers students’ needs and values the social experience, be it online, blended, or conventional provision of education.

Internationalisation and mobility – the first victim

Internationalisation was hit first. An early [EAIE survey report](#) (March 2020) showed that almost two-thirds of institutions saw their outgoing student mobility impacted, but only about half of them reported an impact on their incoming student mobility. Figures on outgoing and incoming staff show even lower levels of concern. A slightly later [ESN survey report](#) showed that 65% of the students continued their mobility, mostly physically, as only 2.4% explicitly mentioned online courses, and 25% cancelled. This changed when border closings prevented any further transborder mobilities. The Coimbra Group, a network of around 40 universities, confirmed in a report published at the end of May 2020 that 70% of its mobile students had been able to continue their mobility virtually, but leaves open whether this was from their hosting or home countries. ([Coimbra Group Report](#), p. 16)

As transborder mobility became basically an illegal act, some international students and staff may have found themselves with expiring grants, visas, and resident permits, and in double isolation due to the pandemic and distance from their established social networks of family and friends. This was a key challenge for both hosting and sending universities, which supported international staff and students in manifold ways, from psychological counselling and additional financial support, to extended stays or increased costs of travelling home.

³ Student life in the EHEA during the Covid-19 pandemic - Preliminary survey results; USI Covid-19 Survey

What are the prospects into the next academic year? Higher education institutions try to provide support, including the option to study remotely in the case of late arrival or quarantine periods. For short-term mobility, such as Erasmus+, some institutions have already cancelled short-term mobility in the next semester or even academic year, and others are envisaging hybrid or blended approaches. There are still travel restrictions, even among EU and Erasmus+ programme countries. Visa offices are not (fully) reopened, and the study application and entry test procedures had or still have to be adjusted to the new situation. It may also require some lobbying to prevent international exchange and collaboration from becoming a collateral losses of safety and austerity policies.

There is also a question of how international students will react. Media reports and surveys suggest that many international students will defer or study in home or neighbouring countries to avoid quarantines and uncertainties about the host institutions' operation modes, as well as the risk of ending up in "online learning abroad" at relatively high tuition fees.

So far, neither virtual mobilities nor the virtual international classroom, while technically feasible, have become common practice in higher education. However, due to the crisis, the European Commission allowed virtual exchange in (partial) replacement of physical exchange under the Erasmus+ mobility programme. While there is widespread agreement that virtual mobility cannot and should not replace physical mobility,⁴ there is the question of whether it can be exploited in a more systematic and strategic fashion to complement physical mobility and serve as an additional option to exchange and collaboration. Therefore, a part of the sector perceives the current crisis as an "opportunity to reflect and elaborate on renewed models of internationalisation at home." (Coimbra Group Report, p. 4).

The impact on research⁵

The crisis also disrupted research activities due to restrictions on international researcher mobility, resulting in obstacles for research collaboration, the closure of labs and the shift to remote collaboration. Critical was also the situation of early career researchers delayed in their projects. According to the SMarTeN study, which collected feedback from 4,000 doctoral candidates and 1,000 early career researchers one month into the lockdown, two-thirds of respondents worry about the future, 70% of which worry about their economic situation. International doctoral candidates are at greater risk, as they often do not have local support networks and may be additionally affected by the situation in their home country. While European Commission funded grants could be deferred or prolonged, they would often not provide additional funding, leaving the researcher without income unless the university decided to cover.

Generally, however, there is a feeling that research has also been efficient in the large-scale move online. For example, there is a clear need for capacity building and sustaining "new ways of working", such as increased interdisciplinarity and cooperation between universities, and with external stakeholders, and innovative ways to foster research communication. Research and innovation have been at the forefront of the fight against Covid-19, which demonstrated to the wider public the value of expertise and interdisciplinarity. This resulted in increased visibility and appreciation for research and higher education.

⁴ Virtual formats versus physical mobility

⁵ If not otherwise indicated, the section is based on discussions in the EUA Research Policy Working Group, the related Expert Groups on Innovation Ecosystems, on Science 2.0 and Open Science, and at the [EUA Council for Doctoral Education](#).

The crisis demonstrated the absolute necessity to grant immediate open access to research publications and data. It also highlighted the need for better coordination of health research at the European level, as well as the potential role of universities in digital industries in the future. Finally, the core values of the research endeavour, e.g. serving society and creating social value, have been put back at the centre of the system.

With all these open questions and uncertainties, most preoccupying are likely the ongoing interruptions of international mobility and cooperation, the immediate shortfall in research spending, and the prospects of decreased public and private spending on research in the near future.

The value of collaboration

Given that the situation was completely new, there was a generally high interest in exchanges of experience, which seems to continue as institutions plan for the next academic year. In several systems, national rectors' conferences enabled a sector response in determining lockdown periods of campuses, negotiating with the national authorities on support measures, and organising sector exchanges on pedagogics and institutional approaches. Existing national structures, such as standing working groups and national platforms on learning and teaching, were an asset.

In addition, a host of national and European university networks and alliances contributed to facilitating exchanges, sharing advice, conducting research (some of which is referenced here) and also in pooling resources and providing support. A concrete example was that, through these exchanges, universities could explore how "the National Agencies act differently from country to country when it comes to dealing with force majeure cases and it was agreed to report to the Commission how important a unified interpretation of the EU Commission's guidelines is" ([Coimbra Group Report](#) p. 14).

Europe matters...

Europe is in a unique situation: While higher education remains a matter of national sovereignty, and therefore the actual scope of European-level action is quite limited, European organisations and structures contributed considerably to a continuation of exchange and partly also to collaboration beyond national borders.

The European Commission facilitated regular exchanges between ministries and also major European networks and associations. In addition, it adjusted its own programmes to the crisis, allowing to defer collaboration and mobility, with a maximum of flexibility towards National Agencies and institutions. This was necessary but it also enhanced a challenge that already existed before: National Agencies respond differently, potentially resulting in a dilemma for projects and mobility implementation. While generally, also beyond the crisis, there is a need for flexibility to consider national institutional conditions, the Coimbra Group nevertheless recommended "a common interpretation of the European Commission's guidelines by National Agencies" ([Coimbra Group Report](#) p. 12).

Unlike for education, the European Commission has a mandate for research. It published a [policy brief](#) entitled „The role of research and innovation in support of Europe's recovery from the Covid-19 crisis“. It covers six axes, including the essential role of R&I funding as one of the most impactful tools at EU level to tackle the Covid-19 outbreak, as well as the crucial role of R&I in coordinating the EU solid response to the pandemic. The members of the European Commission Scientific Panel for Health published an article on „Overcoming fragmentation of health research in Europe: lessons from Covid-19, including „Recommendations of the Horizon2020 Scientific Panel for Health“ (cf. Annex 4.1). Clearly, the European Union setting also provided a clear argument for maintaining multilateralism, and reopening national borders as soon as possible.

At the level of the European Higher Education Area and the Bologna Process, the Covid-19 crisis was addressed in meetings of the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG), in many working groups, and is also reflected in several resulting documents.⁶

The Council of Europe (COE) facilitated exchanges among its members states and European stakeholder organisations, including representatives of higher education institutions, their students, and staff. The results are to feed into a Declaration on the issue (tentatively October 2020), which emphasises the rule of law and democracy, individual rights to high quality, inclusive education also in times of crisis, and the importance of maintaining education, including higher education, as a public responsibility. All of this is of crucial importance, given infringements on academic freedom and autonomy, general violations of human and citizen rights in Europe, and concerns that this the crisis might further aggravate the situation. A dedicated task force has been established to advise ongoing COE initiatives on how to prevent and mitigate the negative impact of the crisis.

But Europe is also about nongovernmental organisations, which represent higher education institutions and their members: the European Students' Union, ETUCE representing staff unions, EUA for universities, EURASHE for non-universities and ENQA for quality assurance agencies. In addition, there is a host of dedicated networks, such as the European Student Network, bringing together Erasmus+ alumni from around the globe.

All these dialogues and activities have helped to enhance mutual understanding, mitigate the impact of the sudden disruptions that border closures caused and keep Europe internationally open.

Into the autumn and towards a “new normal”

It is far too early, to draw a final conclusion. Research on the social and economic effects of the pandemic is ongoing, including IAU's second and third survey, to provide the basis for a more thorough long-term analysis.

While country-level emergencies are lessened, uncertainties remain, and also impact the higher education sector: some institutions hope for a return to “normal” in a few months, others assume this may take a year or longer, and maybe never come, given the direct and indirect consequences of the crisis, ranging from changes in the education provision, inflow of international students, and the expected cuts as part of national austerity measures. Given also the diversity of Europe, none of these can be excluded.

There is no reason to mitigate the challenges of the recent months. They clearly showed the limits and gaps of the current system, in particular how it exacerbated socially vulnerable stakeholders, but also disguised learning and teaching practices which have been questioned by educationalists for many years.

It will be interesting to see what the long-term impact will be. How much will virtual exchanges and remote work be used? Will blended learning not only be a remedy in times of social distancing, but a means for more flexible and better quality learning, and generally a more fluid transition between virtual to physical? How will the experience of the crisis shape joint research, and enhance open access?

⁶ For example, in the “[Recommendations to national authorities for the enhancement of European higher education learning and teaching](#)”, and the shared approach on the “[Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area](#)”, which promotes national approaches to enhance equity and inclusion in higher education.

One concern is that institutional autonomy and academic freedom could be restricted as a result of the crisis. While it cannot be ruled out that this may be the case in some countries, also as part of a general move towards de-democratisation, so far the experience is that most universities enjoyed more rather than less subsidiarity to manage the crisis. This should be considered in discussions about sustainability and resilience: While the university model is often depicted as rather static, adverse to change, and impossible to govern, due to its collegial model, in the current crisis it has been rather proficient and demonstrated resilience and adaptability that exceeded expectations. Foresight and risk mitigation are of course important, but the current crisis also raised the question of its limits: What if the next crisis is completely different – for example a computer virus, or the breakdown of the world's electricity system? What really made a difference were skills, capacities and institutions' participatory organisational structures, which allowed to reorganise, innovate, upscale and connect.

Another challenge will be the economic and budgetary implications for higher education: An [EUA paper](#) points to the prospects of the economy of the European Union shrinking by more than 7%, which is likely to impact, both public and private funding for higher education. Governments will have to decide on whether to support the ailing economy, or, to enhance health. Funding for research might focus on areas of relevance to Covid-19. There might be a loss of student tuition fees in some systems; but in other systems, more people may go to university, to avoid unemployment and prepare for a changed labour market.

List of references

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