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COVID AND UNIVERSITIES: NEW CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

Abstract. *The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the largest disruption in education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion students in more than 190 countries and all continents. School, universities and other educational closures have affected 94 percent of the global student population, with 99 percent in low- and lower-middle-income countries. The crisis exacerbates pre-existing inequalities in education, preventing a large proportion of the most vulnerable young people from continuing their studies.*

Higher education has been transformed over the last year through sharp changes caused by COVID-19 pandemic. In such conditions teachers have to constantly improve and monitor the implementation of new teaching methods and technologies. The next generation of youth is a constant contributor to the challenge, creating new challenges for middle-aged and older teachers. Young people spend more time on gadgets, their attention is less focused, they can spend less time listening to lecture material. Such challenges created the preconditions for transferring education material online.

In just a couple of weeks the COVID-19 pandemic has escalated to a global health crisis and has extensively disrupted (Higher) Education & Research. Worldwide education institutions, from small K12 schools to large university systems are experiencing major challenges in dealing with closed campus facilities, and a resulting major impact in the ability to deliver the highest level of teaching, or research execution.

Institutions are now making the most out of their existing academic LMS solutions and further leveraging video conferencing solutions to support their online learning environments. Yet, the institutions are increasingly faced with new dimensional challenges to ensure adequate student interaction, engagement and success.

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" affirms that 95% pivoted to distance learning throughout the institution, while 4% provided it in some faculties [1].

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, faculties and departments at some institutions have had their own approaches. Disciplines that require lab work, practical experience, and external collaboration were more difficult to teach remotely.

The International Association of Universities has conducted a global surveys on the impact of COVID 19 on universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs). The outcomes of the first survey are the following. Almost all institutions that replied to the survey have been impacted by COVID-19. Only 1 institution out of 424 (one HEI located in Burundi) replied that their institution is open as usual with no special measures in place for COVID-19, and 59% of them replied that all campus activities have stopped and the institution is completely closed [1].

According to the survey almost all HEIs (91%) have infrastructures in place to communicate with their students and staff about COVID-19. This high percentage might suggest that HEIs are using already existing communication means in order to inform their students and staff. Despite the fact that 91 % of the respondents indicated that they have the necessary infrastructure in place to communicate between staff and students, respondents provided more details on the challenges faced in the open questions at the end of the Survey. In fact, although the infrastructures exist, several institutions report that an immediate challenge generated by the lockdown was to ensure clear and effective communication streams with staff and students [1].

At almost all HEIs, COVID-19 affected teaching and learning, only 2% of HEIs (7 HEIs) reported that teaching and learning is not affected. It is important to mention that 4 of the 7 HEIs that reported no effect on teaching and learning are virtual universities and 1 replied that the campus is open as usual, while the other 2 are traditional brick and mortar universities and replied that their campuses were closed. The fact that these two HEIs replied that teaching and learning is not affected, despite their campuses being closed, is surprising. Two-thirds reported that classroom teaching has been replaced by distance teaching and learning and one quarter that most activities are currently suspended but the institution is working on developing solutions to continue teaching and learning, through digital or self-study means. Only 7% reported that teaching has been cancelled [1].

As much as 80% of all higher education institutions have responded to the survey reported that research at their institutions has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation is almost the same in all regions, with Africa having a slightly higher percentage of HEIs affected than all other regions (85% vs. 79%). The most common impact of COVID-19 on research has been the cancelling of international travel (at 83% of HEIs) and the cancellation or postponement of scientific conferences (81% of HEIs). Scientific projects are in danger of not being completed at a bit more than half of HEIs (52%), while at 21% of HEIs scientific research has completely stopped [1].

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed millions of learners, teachers, and researchers to new realities, new ways of learning and teaching, examination, communicating and doing research. It is clear that the impact of COVID-19 on higher education has been tremendous, with all institutions and students having been

affected. Many universities reacted in a flexible way to the crisis, but both the International Association of Universities survey and the most recent U-Multirank data show that not all higher education institutions were prepared for the provision of full online programmes. The IAU global survey on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education around the world reports that about 2/3^d of the responding institutions are replacing classroom teaching by distance learning. This outcome is in line with U-Multirank's data that show that some 60% of the universities worldwide reported online learning provisions in their strategic planning prior to COVID-19 [2].

According to the U-Multirank data, universities with a significant focus on the subject areas of education, business studies and economics, as well as larger institutions and those with a broad disciplinary scope are more likely to provide online programmes. Although a majority of universities realised the strategic relevance of online teaching before the crisis, only few were prepared for full online programmes. In engineering and science fields, the percentage of programmes that are available fully online is less than 3%, but this is substantially higher in sbjects such as business studies (12%) and economics (7%). Furthermore, U-Multirank's data shows that the availability of interactive learning tools and digital exams is low, suggesting that online support on a large scale still proves to be difficult for many universities. Similarly, the results of the IAU survey indicate that challenges are found in 'technical infrastructure, competences, pedagogies and specific study field requirements'. The IAU report says that it is 'encouraging to see that higher education institutions were prepared or are reacting quickly to provide learning opportunities to their students'. According to U-Multirank, the capacity of universities to replace the provision of traditional on-campus 'face-to face' educational programmes with online provision will prove to be a key strategic response to COVID-19 [2].

Uncertainty will remain a fiscal fact of life at colleges and universities for many months to come. To survive in these difficult times, we all will need to prepare for numerous possible scenarios, seek creative solutions, and stay flexible in the face of continuous change.

References

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