



Network of Universities  
from the Capitals of Europe



# COVID-19 - Challenges and good practices at UNICA member universities

Results of the survey  
conducted in April 2020



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# **COVID-19 - Challenges and good practices at UNICA member universities**

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**Results of the survey conducted in April 2020**

June 2020

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## Introduction

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The survey was launched on 2 April 2020 and was open to all UNICA members with the aim to gather information on the main challenges that universities are facing due to the COVID19 outbreak, but also to collect good practices and recommendations regarding didactics, research, and mobility, which could be shared within the Network and voiced to the European Commission and other HE stakeholders.

The responses to the survey were collected between 2 April and 4 May 2020, and 36 out of 53 UNICA member universities from 28 countries participated in the survey (response rate: 70%).

The survey was sent to Rectors, Vice-Rectors International, IROs and UNICA Contact Persons.

69% of the responses to the survey were submitted by Heads (47%) or other officers of the International Relations Offices, Student Mobility Units, study exchange coordinators and Erasmus institutional coordinators. 25% of the respondents hold senior positions at central institutional level (e.g. Vice-Rector, Rector's deputy).

# 1. Repatriation of students and staff abroad

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**Question:** What are the main challenges that you faced and the main measures that your university took regarding the European repatriation procedure for students and staff abroad?

The repatriation of students and staff abroad was under the responsibility of the National Ministries of Foreign Affairs. However, universities closely cooperated with the national authorities and major efforts were carried out in order to collect and update the information on students and staff abroad and to establish constant communication channels with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, the diplomatic missions abroad, and the National Agencies.

Furthermore, universities have been pro-actively monitoring and supporting students and staff, and the International Relations Offices have acted as a coordination hub among the students, the parents, faculty members, exchange coordinators, and the hosting/partner universities.

Although the survey did not collect precise figures, the responses received indicate that student drop out was overall limited, transition to online classes and lectures was carried out quickly, and most of the students could continue mobility on distance learning, either at home or from the host country.

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According to the [research report released by ESN](#) on 9 April regarding the impact of COVID-19 on student exchanges in Europe, **almost two thirds of the students' mobility periods continued, a quarter of them were cancelled.** The report builds on a survey in which 22,000 international students and trainees in Europe provided information about their experience.

## 1.1. Major challenges

Most UNICA member universities report that the major challenges in the first phase of the pandemic were the following:

- **Bringing students home** due to lockdowns, cancellation of flights in several countries, increasing prices of transportation;
- **Rapid prevalence** and quickly changing situation; **unpreparedness** for such type of situation;
- Ensuring **effective and timely decision making** to enable staff and students to decide while at the same time guaranteeing that their academic progress would not be hindered;
- Ensuring the efficient **coordination** of the many and diverse stakeholders involved in repatriation;

- Gathering answers from the students as quick as possible and having a **full inventory of students and staff abroad**, especially for individuals who do not always report when they go abroad and are not managed centrally; keeping track of the choices made by students on mobility schemes outside of Europe; not getting answers from students abroad regarding their location/situation;
- Being able to provide **individual responses and solutions for any kind of personal situations**, issues and needs;
- **Communication**: disseminating the information quickly, presenting suitable recommendations for students and staff, circulating verified information, quickly developing relevant university policies and measures.

**Several universities also report the following issues:**

- Managing health and safety fears of the student;  
Some respondents underline that the situation caused a great stress in many students, because of the uncertainty around courses, exams, cancellation of flights, bureaucratic as well as personal issues. Almost if not all universities took plenty of initiatives aimed at providing psychological support and advice to both students and staff;
- Insufficiency of the health insurance coverage abroad;
- Initial underestimation of the advice to return to their home country by students and staff members abroad;
- Making students returning home aware of travel restrictions, quarantine and self-isolation requirements at their destination;
- Extending visas and stays in halls of residence for students unable to return home, making accommodation contract arrangements for those who chose to remain abroad;
- GDPR issues when putting together various lists of students;
- Workload and bureaucracy added to the universities when reporting the mobilities.

## 1.2. Main measures

Most universities took a centralized approach and decisions were supported by the universities' management teams. Many respondents underline the **efforts, the spirit of cooperation and the flexibility of both the administrative and teaching staff**, which made the quick transition to distant learning and online tools not only possible but moreover effective and successful in most cases.

**Most universities didn't issue a recall but strongly recommended students to return home**, the main concern being to make sure that students were doing well and to support them whenever necessary. Therefore, students could decide based on various factors (security, health, academic and personal considerations). Several students reported that they felt safe in the host countries and that host universities promptly shifted to providing lectures and services online, and consequently decided to stay and complete their mobility in the host country.

The main measures adopted by the universities to respond to the above-mentioned challenges were the following:

- Establishing **direct contacts and providing support** (often 24/7) to staff members and students abroad and to international students and staff on campuses;
- **Intensive email campaigns** to contact each individual and have a full inventory of students and staff abroad;
- Quickly setting up **crisis communication strategies and channels** (creation of front-page dedicated sections on the universities' websites, Frequently Asked Questions, latest official news and recommendations from national Ministries of Health and Foreign Affairs, World Health Organization, European Center for Disease Prevention and Control, Travel Instructions, etc).



## 2. Handling of the interrupted Erasmus+ mobilities



**Question:** What are the major needs and which improvements would be needed in the Erasmus+ programme in order to support universities in handling the interrupted mobilities of students and staff?

### Extension of projects, flexibility regarding the Erasmus+ grants, delay in submitting final reports, simplification, a clear and common framework

While there is a nearly unanimous agreement on the fact that these measures would be of the utmost importance to help universities in handling the situation caused by the COVID-19 crisis, different opinions can be noted when it comes to the recommendations issued by the European Commission and the guidance provided by the different National Agencies.

**Flexibility is fine, but now there are so many flexible rules that general guidance sometimes seems to be missing, and without clear guidance, the programme might lose the trust of participants**

It is **generally acknowledged that the Commission has to some extent recognized the needs of HEIs**: the EC has extended several application deadlines for Erasmus+, set up some minimum requirements for all National Agencies, and quickly issued general recommendations encouraging NAs and HEIs to use the "force majeure" clauses as a broad and flexible framework to handle the different degrees of disruption in the best interest of students. The use of "force majeure" makes it possible to accept certain additional costs of mobile students and staff due to the special situation up to a maximum grant amount and may also enable them to postpone the planned activities by up to 12 months per project.

**37,5% of the students experienced at least one major problem** related to their exchange (loss of transportation to return home, problems with accommodation and with access to basic needs, e.g. food and sanitary products).

**7% of the students** reported that they will not get any grant at all for their studies. 24% reported that they will keep the grant, partially or fully. The majority of the students do not know what will happen to their grants.

From the [ESN research report](#) on the impact of COVID-19 on student exchanges in Europe

**Some universities declare to be very satisfied with both the guidelines issued by the EC and the support and guidance provided by National Agencies, and do not feel that there is any need for further clarifications or improvements to what has already been done.**

*"At the moment, everything seems to be under control: at most universities, students can continue their exchange semester remotely, including retaining the scholarship and also claiming reimbursement for extraordinary expenses".*

On the other hand, several universities report that one of the main issues was the lack of clear information from the European Commission and/or from the National Agencies.

“National Agency and European Commission advice has seemed to change several times and has come with explanations that are difficult to translate” which - together with delays in implementing the recommendations issued by the EC and the differences between countries in applying the general guidelines - “has really added to the stress of trying to support students through this”.

*“The biggest challenge is uncertainty and participants need clear rules and procedures more than ever to be able to make informed decisions. They need to see that their best interest is taken into account, and they are supported in every scenario, especially when it comes to financial issues”.*

A few cases are reported of NAs taking non-student-friendly measures (e.g. students who returned back and could continue their Erasmus studies via distance education but were considered eligible only for the part of the grant that applies for the period of stay abroad).

In short, a common framework regarding the continuation of the interrupted semester at the home university, ECTS recognition/transfer and completion, the financial aspects (on support to participants and on reallocation of the remaining budget), presumption of such case and amendments to the Learning Agreement, and regarding the various cases of students who have dropped out of their mobility, would have been very much welcome.

## 2.1. Major needs

The needs expressed by the respondents can be summarized under three main categories:

- a) administration of mobility,
- b) recognition,
- c) quality and range of online educational resources.

### a) Administration of mobility


**A simplified process and clearer rules to secure a fair and quick way to determine the Erasmus+ grant in case of force majeure** are considered essential by almost if not all respondents, in particular regarding the following points:

- What extraordinary costs are eligible for force majeure reporting and which are the required supporting documents;

- Whether a switch to online courses is equal to mobility and hence the scholarship can be paid for the full period;
- Need to find a set of shared solutions for the various cases of students who have dropped out of their mobility and decided to simply return home, without continuing the online classes at the host university;
- It would be crucial for universities to receive clear information regarding the upcoming semester (some universities already took the decision to cancel all exchanges for the autumn semester 2020), and the possibility to reallocate the funds that students and staff couldn't use this semester to the forthcoming academic, or even calendar year;
- Due to the many different situations of outgoing students the declaration in the Mobility Tool will need to be done manually;
- The current crisis and resulting added bureaucracy highlighted that it is still a major need to speed up the digitalization process of the Erasmus+ programme and to really achieve "Erasmus+ without paper";
- A widespread concern is ensuring that - given the special situation and the extraordinary costs that most of them had to face – the students can keep their full grant. Some respondents highlight the following issues in the use of "force majeure" to cover extra costs:
  - The current proposal of the Commission is to declare repatriation costs up to the travel cost allowance normally assigned, which is clearly not enough to cover the costs of tickets that had to be bought in an emergency. This results in the necessity for HEIs to cover part of the real costs on their own budget. Supportive financial measures and special funds have been already introduced by many universities, but this could be a new challenge for their budget. Furthermore, the allocation of costs on two different budget lines makes work very difficult;
  - Extraordinary costs can be reimbursed but e.g. proof that insurance is not covering is required and collecting such documents from all the students is challenging;
  - The recognition of costs requires a case-by-case assessment and the need for HEIs to liaise with National Agencies to evaluate the requests;
  - Being transparent and fair and at the same time complying with the programme's rules was a real challenge considering the real-life cases, the diversity and complexity of payment categories, and the hard-to-substantiate expense situations;
  - The implementation of force majeure has further added to the workload of managing the programme in this already difficult situation.

 **More flexibility with documentation and a trust-based procedure for reimbursement claims would be really helpful**

## Good practices put in place by UNICA members



Several UNICA members have allocated **special funding to pay students the full exchange grant** regardless of whether they decided to continue the mobility semester online or not. Special university funds have been used to support students and staff expenses not covered by the existing reimbursement procedures, including the “force majeure” clause: introduction of compensatory mechanisms for interrupted mobility programmes (reimbursement of some extraordinary travel and living expenses, purchase of tickets for students who decided to return, etc.), or funds to help students in need of financial support abroad or on their returning home.

### b) Recognition

- Need for online teaching, evaluation, and catalogs to be recognized by the Erasmus offices at students’ home universities;
- It is vital to replace physical mobilities with virtual ones in order to acquire and perform what had been planned in the Learning Agreements of students;
- Need to find shared solutions for the recognition of the knowledge, skills and competences that could not have been acquired due to interrupted mobilities, or of partially acquired learning outcomes;
- Need for more flexibility in the recognition of study periods for international exchange students
- Need for alternatives of grading (like pass/fail).
- “Completion of 30 ECTS in one semester” rule might be eased in 2019-2020 spring semester;
- A specific point regarding the shifting to distance learning format in case of unexpected and emergency situations might be added to the Erasmus agreements.

### c) Online educational resources

- Need for a broader array of online education resources;
- Need to improve distance educational technologies;
- Need for a better virtual mobility support;
- The development and implementation of a single platform for virtual classrooms would be beneficial;
- Need for consultations on the further development of digital education in the light of national policies and legislations and of the EU priorities.

### 3. Management of European-funded projects

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**Question:** What are the main challenges that you are facing in the management of European-funded projects?

**Different degrees of disruption** are reported in the management of European funded projects, from delays of activities and deadlines, to situations requiring an extension of the projects, to situations where projects might be suspended, this being especially the case for lab-based research projects.

The **projects which were originally designed to involve face-to-face interaction, physical mobility, training programs, field work, experimental activities, and activities such as the distribution and analysis of questionnaires, are of course the most affected** by the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak.

**Field work and work in the laboratories has virtually stopped due to lockdown of educational (and research) institutions very early. As a result, researchers do not have any source of funding since they cannot do their research. We're in the survival mode when it comes to them**

In this context, a **widespread concern** is the **extra cost of personnel and of (PhD) scholarships**. The suspension of research-related activities and the need for extensions raise questions around the sustainability of keeping people in employment and pay their salaries during the extension as well as during the months of less activity or inactivity.

“We need to re- organize everything around the lockdown due to the pandemic”, and **uncertainty** is

again one of the main constraints: lack of information, timing of the information on the changes, what is allowed and what is not due to special circumstances, unpredictability of the restart of activities, resulting difficulty to promote, are common challenges.

**More in detail, the main issues reported by the respondents are the following:**

- Delays in the experimental part of projects and PhD programs;
- Research activities involving fieldwork (e.g. excavations) or the consultation of historical collections and physical documentation had to be suspended;
- Lab-based research projects were largely suspended.
- Delays in data collection, with consequent potential severe impact not only on the execution, but moreover on the publication of scientific articles and on the preparation of new applications for funding;
- Impact on clinical studies and patients/volunteers engagement (all non-Covid 19 clinical activities have been paused);

- Problems with the acquisition and installation of research equipment from abroad, with hiring researchers from other countries, secondments to other countries in the frame of EU funded projects, especially Marie Skłodowska Curie (postponed or cancelled);
- Managing the delays caused by postponed events, fear of overload in the autumn semester;
- Increased administrative workload in terms of project management due to the communication with funding agencies, requests for amendments for duration, budget etc.
- Situations that require a physical LEAR signature in case of the responsible person being ill;
- Cancellation or postponement of most dissemination activities such as conferences, seminars etc.
- Facing deadlines of the current projects and reporting deadlines;
- Uncertainty about whether the extension of certain projects will be approved or not.

**36-month KA203 Strategic Partnerships that began in 2017 are coming to an end in August 2020. We have had to cancel dissemination events that are vital to achieving the objectives of our projects. National Agencies have not confirmed yet whether it might be possible to suspend activities and get an extension to our projects.**

**As a result, several universities run the risk of not being able to achieve all the projects' outcomes and deliverables by the scheduled deadlines, especially in the case of projects ending in 2020:**

- Financial execution and related reports and reimbursements can be severely hampered;
- Risk of failure in carrying out the scientific execution of the projects, which might result in the loss of funding;
- Loss of competitiveness in calls for financing due to the lack of preliminary results;
- PhD students may need additional time to complete their theses.

### **3.1. Specific challenges in the management of Erasmus+ Mobility (KA103 and KA107 projects)**

The widespread uncertainty about how mobility will take place in 2020/21 and the preparation to the next academic year as well as to the next Erasmus programme are very common and shared concerns. Clear communication and a time frame by the Commission would be again extremely helpful.

**Main challenges reported by the respondents:**

- Realizing the **contracted amount of mobilities**;
- **Interrupted mobilities** (see also [point 2 of the report](#)).

- On the one hand, some respondents report that the National Agency allowed to prolong the grant period for a year, giving them the opportunity to postpone planned mobilities to the academic year 2020-2021. On the other hand, several universities report that at the time they filled out the survey neither the EACEA nor the National Agency had confirmed yet whether the cancelled mobilities could be realized next year.
- Promotion of the ongoing calls and engagement of possible candidates;
- The uncertainty on whether the situation will stabilize by the following semester also affects the discussion and agreements between all involved stakeholders (communication between offices in charge regarding signing new LAs and planning implementation, communication between staff in partner universities in planning activities and visits in the future, communication between interested students and their possible mentors in partner universities, etc.);
- Following usual procedures and providing for all the required paperwork and signatures/approvals;
- Different level of accepting digitalized documents in European countries.

**It is not very helpful that we are still facing the renewal of all our Erasmus Agreements for the next program generation and there is still a test phase and no working tool for the renewal of the agreements although we are supposed to have everything renewed by November 2020 in order to keep our procedures going**

- **Preparing for the next academic year's mobilities:**

- Issues with visa requests for incoming students (some countries have temporarily suspended handling all visa requests);
- introducing digital only processes in the grant payment;
- preparing for possible distance learning at the beginning of the next semester and to non-physical registration of incoming students.

- **Preparation of the next Erasmus programme:**

- finding the capacity to set up meaningful, well-planned co-operations when signing the new inter-institutional agreements (as opposed to administrative only approach when re-signing the IIAs). Usually professors are responsible for this activity, but are now overloaded with providing distance education;
- Online working is not a problem regarding the day to day management of the mobilities but it is challenging when it comes to filling out the reports and the application for the new Erasmus Chart. These tasks are generally done with different members of the team working together, and moreover not all the staff members have all the necessary tools at home;
- With the preparations for the new Erasmus programme already under way, the process of reviewing and renewing inter-institutional agreements has been delayed.

## Impact on the European Universities Initiative. The case of the 4EU+ Alliance

Within 4EU+ the direct effect of Covid-19 has been the halting of all travel activity. A lot of meetings and workshops for both researchers and administrative staff had to be postponed and/or reorganized as virtual meetings. However, due to the complexity of some of these meetings and workshops, it has not been possible to switch all of them to an online format. Another uncertainty at the moment is whether it will be possible to run the scheduled summer schools - either physically or virtually. Also planned exchange among the researchers is on hold at the moment.

### Three project coordinators from METU share their experience

**Case 1.** The main problem I am facing regarding the Jean Monnet Network that I am coordinating, is that the all scheduled events (workshops, students' simulations and network summits) and teaching mobilities are impossible to carry out at the moment. Moreover, the research that would feed into the project deliverables involves fieldwork and structured interviews that cannot be carried out by any of the project partners either. All in all, the current situation substantially impacts the continuation and the outputs of the project and will potentially cause delays in its implementation.

**Case 2.** One of the Erasmus projects I coordinate is a 36-month project ending in September, which cannot be extended. Activities involving schools in Turkey and in the partner countries were planned in April and May. However, schools are closed, and the scheduled activities cannot be implemented.

**Case 3.** Our project is mainly based on the implementation of Learning, Teaching and Training activities (LTT). The LTT activities implemented before the COVID-19 crisis have been excellent opportunities for the project partners and all the stakeholders (i.e. academics, pre-service teachers, K-12 teachers, students and schools' principals): they have been fruitful in terms of enabling face to face interaction and as ice breakers, and have provided the opportunity to gain insights into

different educational contexts as well as to foster intercultural communication.

Due to the current situation, the scheduled LTT activities had to be cancelled and the above-mentioned positive outcomes have been temporarily suspended.

At the beginning of the global spread of Covid-19, we were not immediately able to decide whether to hold the upcoming LTT event in one of the partner countries. As the situation became even more serious, we cancelled it and then we had to deal with the plane tickets that had been bought by some of the partners before we decided to cancel the event.

We are also facing problems with the preparation of the intellectual outputs due to the closure of K-12 schools and universities, which had a disrupting impact on data collection. Being completely based on in-school teaching practice, our project has been severely affected by the consequences of the pandemic as we haven't had the opportunity to observe the implementation in a real classroom environment in the spring semester of the academic year 2019 -2020. These observations were beneficial for all parties: the teachers got detailed feedback on their lesson plans from the university supervisors and this helped them to look at the issues from different perspectives, bring in more variety into the lesson, come up with creative ideas for their lessons and integrate technological tools, and on the other hand we could learn from them in terms of variety in the mode of teaching.



Decision-making is another challenge given that each country is experiencing the pandemic with a different timing and at a varying degree, and each country takes measures based on its specific health situation. The dates of closure and opening of schools as well as the way education is conducted during the pandemic vary in each partner country. This makes it almost impossible to make a decision regarding the current teaching implementations which can apply to all the partners, and to set deadlines for all the organizations involved. Moreover, it has become problematic organizing activities between the university partners and K-12 schools even within the same country since their administration and implementation vary both in principles and practice.

To face these challenges, we are trying to modify and adapt our project plans. We are investigating online instruction opportunities to be able to carry on the collection of data, and we have considered making use of distance education opportunities to continue with our planned schedule. However, our lesson plans were designed based on face to face traditional teaching and cannot serve the purpose anymore. One of the essential aims of our project was to implement teaching in K-12 schools in cooperation with pre-service teachers at universities. The implementation of these activities online -although currently necessary - do not allow us to fulfill some of the most important dimensions of the project.

## 4. Virtual communication and distance learning

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**Question:** Most universities are responding by leveraging virtual communications, flexible study and distance learning. Is online learning working well at your institution? Are you experiencing specific challenges, or do you have any good practices to share?

Some universities already made extensive use of online teaching tools and this facilitated the transition to full online teaching. Universities with a strong emphasis on classroom and laboratory-based education and where online learning has been implemented mostly in a supplementary function to classroom activities, report that the closure of the university has exposed a number of critical weaknesses to this approach.

However, overall and given the necessity to act very quickly, the transition to distance learning has worked “reasonably well”, “very well” and, in some cases, “surprisingly well”, this being especially the case for universities which traditionally offer campus-based classes.

Having said that, full online teaching and learning is challenging, requires increased workload, and some respondents underline that students and staff declare to be more exhausted by online teaching, meetings, and providing feedback to students.

### 4.1. Main challenges

a) Lack of experience of many teachers with the online learning platforms and the need for fast upskilling and training.

Problems have been experienced especially at the beginning due to the lack of experience of many teachers with the online learning platforms, the need to test them and to evaluate their usage within different scenarios and under pressure. Universities also had to quickly provide assistance and useful instructions to the university community, as well as fast track training in online teaching and learning methodologies.

b) IT issues

- Preparing learning platforms for a comprehensive and unified long-term use;
- Difficulties to find a unified technical solution;
- Solving a number of technical issues aimed at improving fault tolerance, system performance, and information security related issues;

**While staff morale is high and the current crisis is also demonstrating just how much is possible under less than ideal conditions, some structural obstacles need to be removed if we want digital learning to expand in HEIs**

- Assessing and fixing the risks related to the continuity of the systems and the services provided (doubled or even tripled load, systems getting blocked during the busiest hours).

### c) Examinations & knowledge evaluation

- Distance examination - especially of large groups - are reported by several universities as a major challenge not solved yet;
- Some respondents report that digital solutions have to be founded yet for examinations in practical activities, for instance in programming.
- General challenges related to knowledge evaluations, which are very diverse (written exams, essays, group work, practical / laboratory classes, oral exams);
- Some assessments have required modification to allow for online submission/online presentations;
- Possibility of discussing degree and doctoral theses, dedicated space for remote theses.

### d) Courses that cannot be delivered online

For lab-based, field and creative courses it is very difficult to conduct studies online and to receive feedback from the professors.

### e) Digital exclusion, increased risk of students' drop-out.

- A widespread concern is that a number of students may not have access to the tools and equipment (hardware and software) and connections required to participate in online learning;
- Increased risks to lose contact with some students who might be in difficult situation;
- Insufficient number of computers at home when all the family has to work and learn remotely;
- No access to broad band, no range in particular in the countryside;
- Challenges for staff with kids in combining wage labour with care work for their family and children;
- Learning curve for working with the new tools (e.g. replacement of whiteboard with digital canvas).

### f) Other

- Identifying the students properly, concerns regarding the possibility of increased cheating.
- Time difference with the country of the incoming students, if they were following the course from their home country.

## 4.2. Main measures taken by UNICA members

- Making available customized tutorials for the various online teaching platforms required for short-term use by the teaching staff (such as Zoom, Google Meet or Google Teams);
- Providing fast track training for the teaching staff in online teaching and learning methodologies;

- IT Services have implemented staff communications to support awareness and transition; increased number of colleagues working in IT support and helpdesk;
- Administrative, technical and library services made available remotely via network connection;
- User support hotlines for campus members to ask any questions about working remotely; devoted e-mail addresses for students and/or staff who have questions or are facing difficulties regarding online courses or are experiencing technical issues.
- Peer-to-peer support space to assist with the rapid turnaround requiring fast upskilling and training;
- Even at a distance, timetables are essentials: teachers in a same training program were asked to coordinate the schedule of the activities and online courses or meetings;
- HSE developed a new app called [HSE Mobile SDK](#) - everything necessary for a smooth transition to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- E-learning curriculum on Methodology of online courses published publicly;
- Beside the central e-learning support, e-learning experts from the faculties were asked to help in handling the more faculty-specific questions;
- Investments in digital infrastructure: increasing the university' network capacity, ordering new hardware and software licenses, headsets & webcams to equip teaching staff for the home production of digital content and conducting classes online;
- Initiatives to limit inequalities regarding access to technology (free access to public Wi-Fi networks, internet access cards, provision of laptops, financial support to the students for the internet costs).

## Policies on online tools and platforms



Some universities have chosen to be flexible in their policy regarding the platforms and online tools to be used and let teachers the freedom to use the systems more suitable for them and the students. Sometimes, online teaching systems were selected as a result of negotiations and consultations between the teachers and their students.

Other universities on the contrary instructed teachers and students to use only some specific tools and recommended to prevent an excessive diversification of software and platforms, or let teachers choose freely their preferred methods and tools but provide technical and methodological support only for a number of selected environments.



The open mindedness and flexibility of teaching staff in developing teaching material for the online platforms and in using the online teaching systems, as well as the cooperation and support of administrative and IT staff were key factors in the switching to online learning.

## 5. Support to students and staff isolated at home

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**Question:** Which support is your institution offering for students and staff isolated at home (extra online activities, information, psychological support, special funding, etc.)?

Universities are providing a wide range of online information, support, and extra online activities to both students and staff. Besides the technical and didactic support to enable the ability of both students and staff to continue teaching and learning from home and the information related to the pandemics, most universities are putting a strong focus on mental wellbeing and community engagement, and are supporting solidarity among students, citizens and institutions.

### a) Extra online activities, information, IT support

- Articles on how to organise time, what to do, how to do, links to free education websites, tips on self-learning;
- Extensive IT support, tutorials and on-line trainings on the tools used and recommended and in terms of organizing and sustaining the educational process online both for students and staff;

**So far, staff are responding with energy, patience and creativity to the challenge of having to convert their classroom-based teaching into online-only sessions from often ill-equipped Home Offices**

- Trainings in teaching and learning for teachers;
- Online forum for academic staff to exchange ideas, good practices and experiences regarding e-learning (<http://e-learning.ucy.ac.cy>)
- Extracurricular webinars;
  - Providing verified information on the pandemic to keep the academic community free from fake news and

popular science advice (examples: [how to navigate the overflow of information](#) by National Research University Higher School of Economics, and [how to avoid fake news](#) by Vilnius University);

- Information on useful services (i.e. copy centers that are still operating);
- Online documents and electronic resources provided by the libraries;
- Call centers for prospective students and online Open days;
- Information to students and staff on different calls for projects and activities related to the pandemic where they can contribute.

## b) Wellbeing, solidarity, community engagement

- Online psychological services and support, guidelines how to take care of psychological health, mental health resources, dedicated phone numbers in operation 24/7 that can be contacted by students in distress or in need, online advice sessions open to all organised by the Faculties of Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience, articles and advice on how to deal with anxiety and worries in corona time (examples: [University of Iceland](#), [University of Copenhagen](#), [Vilnius University](#), [King's College London](#), [University of Latvia](#), [University of Ljubljana](#), [Sapienza University of Rome](#), [University of Warsaw](#), [University of Bucharest](#));
- Physical exercise online guides, daily online sport moments to prevent ergonomic troubles, free online sport lessons, tips on how to arrange the workspace at home to prevent ergonomic problems;
- Lots of free online events and activities to support the academic community during this period (virtual cultural tours; educational, entertainment and supportive activities and content; virtual competitions and games).



Several initiatives of community engagement carried out by UNICA members during the pandemic are collected in [the issue May 2020 of the UNICA Newsletter](#).

## c) Special funding, access to technology, practical support

- Special funding has been allocated by many universities for students facing financial difficulties/having special needs, and for students having lost their student jobs;
- Extensions of the deadlines for the payment of the university fees for the 2019-20 academic year;
- Several initiatives have been taken to limit inequalities regarding access to technology: free access to public Wi-Fi networks, laptops and internet access cards lent to students and occasionally to staff, financial support to the students for the internet costs;
- Initiatives aiming to help staff members who have to manage the double burden of working from home and keep their children busy while being locked down (some universities have provided learning and recreational activities for kids, and HSE has organized a 3-week online camp for children aged 6-16);
- Daily medical examinations for the students; testing potential quarantined students and staff for COVID (Medical Faculties);
- Vouchers for purchase in food stores;
- Maintaining open accommodation services over the summer;
- Dropping the rent in student accommodations during the quarantine;
- Ensuring all the sanitary conditions for staying at University's dormitories;
- We have prepared housing for students that need to be isolated in case of COVID-19;
- Provision of Emergency Phones for management and immediate action to the academic community.

## 6. Students' initiatives

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**Question:** Do the students engage in providing any kind of support to other students?

The information about initiatives from students was not available to all the respondents. Others mention that several students participate informally in volunteer activities and exchange information through social media but are not aware of organised and coordinated activities. In many cases, the Erasmus Student Network and the Students' unions are providing support and have established a wide range of supportive actions, activities and communication channels for the students.

### Examples of students' initiatives were reported by:

- Charles University: medical students volunteered immediately to help; other students offered to volunteer as well, for example the students from the Faculty of Education help with kids of staff members or other students.
- Comenius University in Bratislava: mainly medical students, students of pharmacy and IT students are given many opportunities to help other students/elderly people; there is also a psychological advisory desk, spiritual help, blood giving calls, students can help with babysitting, shopping, sewing face masks. There are also law consulting offers.
- METU: student mentors, a voluntary student body system designed for METU's international incomings, supported by METU Erasmus Student Network and International Students Association (MISA).
- Universidad Complutense de Madrid: students volunteered to help in producing material to fight the spread of the pandemic.
- National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE): "Digital Volunteers" is a new student's movement at HSE supported by the Department of Digital transformation, Faculty of Computer Sciences and HSE Institute of Electronics and Mathematics. First 22 students have been already prepared to support other students, staff and faculties in their use of digital tools for learning, teaching, administrative tasks and meetings.
- National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE): many HSE students are working to ensure Moscow's elderly don't get too lonely by communicating with them remotely. As of April 1, 2020, the HSE Centre for Support for the Older Generation has 231 volunteers. This includes students, university staff, and faculty members. They help older colleagues, as well as veterans and participants of the Moscow Longevity project at HSE. In total, the volunteers are currently helping about 1,200 elderly Muscovites.
- University College Dublin: UCD Global Guides provide peer to peer support via social media, such as the Instagram takeover, and the UCD Global Lounge virtual events & activities programme.
- Université libre de Bruxelles: Several projects are developing among students, centred on helping each other, and/or helping the community and specifically health care and hospitals. Two examples: a "FIFA-

Covid19 contest” to stay connected through a relaxing and challenging activity, all profits going to a hospital in Brussels; many students and staff took part in volunteer work initiated within the university and the association ULB Engagée, through the platform “CoronaSolidarité”.

- University of Bucharest: some students are members of the group from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences that provides educational and psychological assistance to the academic community; some of the students’ unions provide tips for their colleagues on how to spend their time in a smart way: online or live theatre plays, shows, stand-up comedy, e-books, virtual museums, as well as posting advice on how to concentrate on and complete their final dissertations.
- University of Belgrade: The faculties of the University of Belgrade already had systems of support and tutoring where senior students and soon to be graduates were helping their younger colleagues. This practice has now moved online and groups at faculties are using TC and RC applications to organize and promote this way of support. Students in Psychology have self-organized in providing psychological support to their colleagues. Many students from various faculties joined different volunteering groups helping in hospitals and offering daily support to vulnerable categories of citizens.
- University of Iceland: Psychology students (masters) assist with psychological support services. Mentors for international students were encouraged to contact and support international students.
- University of Ljubljana: medical and health care students act in COVID-19 testing/prevention teams.
- Vrije Universiteit Brussel: a buddy system was set up.



## 7. Impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the EHEA

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**Question:** In your opinion, how could the COVID-19 outbreak impact the EHEA in the upcoming months and which actions could the HE community take to limit these challenges?

Although many respondents highlight that in the current situation the impact of the corona crisis as well as its extent are still largely unpredictable, it is clear that the pandemic will have manifold and severe consequences on Higher Education.

On the other side, the current crisis is also seen as an opportunity for institutions to become more aware of their vague sides, to get the most out of the digitalization efforts made in such a short time, to strengthen the social role of universities, and to further develop joint and innovative approaches and solutions at all levels.

### 7.1. Challenges

While mobility (both for studies, placements as well as research) is facing the greatest challenge, the results of the survey also show a widespread concern about the expected medium- and long-term impact of the pandemic on international cooperation, joint research projects, research and activities demanding field and lab-based work.

Restrictions to travel and the need for social distancing are affecting conferences, academic and cultural events, and scientific activities, with potential impact on the sharing of good practices and experiences within the HE community.

Moreover, appetite for mobility could be affected for a long time even after the end of the crisis, this making the promotion of its benefits and internationalisation at home more important than ever.

While the current crisis is demonstrating how much is possible under emergency conditions, there is a widespread feeling that virtual communication cannot replace the intellectual exchange both in campuses and within the international community.

#### Main challenges:

- Staff being highly occupied in handling questions related to the Covid-19 crisis, delays are possible at all levels as well as accumulated workload. Less time can be devoted to developing projects and there is a risk that key objectives can't be reached in time;
- Guiding inbound and outbound students regarding the upcoming fall semester 2020 due to the current uncertainty on whether and how face-to-face teaching and physical mobility will take place;
- Impact anticipated in terms of recruitment and admissions (student numbers);
- Virtual learning environments must be developed and refined, to allow online teaching and learning.

- Challenges and delays in the end of year assessments, graduation exams, enrolment to University (process, criteria), completion (of semesters, studies), and potential changes to the next academic year. Universities must find ways to evaluate students through online tools and come up with alternative means of selecting and enrolling students.
- Significant financial strain on universities that rely on the fees paid by international students;
- Major risk for the situation to deepen inequalities among the students. The measures taken by many universities to support students facing financial difficulties are of course helpful but there is still a risk to lose contact with many of these students;
- The emotional stress of workers, highly changed life-situations that affect productivity must be also taken into account as reality.

## 7.2. Opportunities

While the current crisis undoubtedly poses multiple and severe threats to Higher Education, many respondents believe that universities should try and make the best of the current challenges, and first of all of the digitalization efforts made in such a short time, that would never have been possible under normal circumstances. Online teaching has pervaded in an otherwise rather classic university environment, and academics have been compelled to develop their online skills and teaching materials.

**This outbreak will show the institutions their vague sides and it will assist to improve the readiness for online activities.**

**In this sense, the crisis is seen an opportunity to strengthen the digitalization of HE:**

- Identify the online and digital formats that are suitable for exchange formats and develop them together with partners, so that also in the future Internationalization at home can be easily done and students who cannot participate in physical exchange programs can be exposed to international classroom and learning experiences by virtual learning;
- Further develop and promote blended and virtual mobility and address the issued related to the recognition and funding for not physical mobility;
- Enhancing joint and innovative efforts of the HE community in developing new ways to deliver virtual teaching and virtual mobility;
- Enhance online training, that will enable the development of more joint programs and research;
- Further implement electronic services for students and staff and strengthen the distance learning infrastructure;
- Further improve and facilitate online working and co-working and find solutions to possible pitfalls;
- Simplify processes and administrative requirements whenever possible.

**“Universities must stay close to the community and subtly advise and help in the authorities in combating this situation. They must be at the forefront of research on areas that have to do with COVID-19 and must encourage collaboration and exchange of good practices with fellow institutions, to come out of this situation as strong and as united as possible”.**

The COVID-19 crisis has showed the capacity of HE to face an emergency with resilience, flexibility and creativity. However, it has also highlighted the need for a common and shared strategy on how to handle system disruptions and –more generally – the need for higher understanding, solidarity and sense of community among all stakeholders.

“The current crisis mostly impacts the EHEA by the uncertainty it entails, and the best way to limit this challenge is to define an operational framework for every scenario and

share them as best practice within the HE community. It is extremely important now to closely communicate via university networks, share the challenges we face, and work out joint approaches”.

Increased cooperation and the development of joint solutions to face current and possible future challenges are considered as key.

Some practical suggestions made by the respondents are listed below:

- Setting up a commonly agreed approach – or set of approaches – for universities in the EHEA considering mobility in 2020/21;
- A portal of the latest positions regarding travel restrictions for parts of 2020/21 academic year in different EU countries;
- One unified point for information (help line) on EU level that acts quickly and decisively in order to avoid national interpretations;
- Revised quality standards for universities to be provided by the national agencies in order for universities to be better adapted and more flexible in terms of practical placements, extracurricular events, curriculum design and content etc.;
- UNICA member universities can share their English online programs and courses with each other and offer different advantages to students by accepting these courses credits.
- HE community could give more guidance and incentives in terms of promoting flexible study implementation (online and offline), more flexible careers of teachers (e.g. not relying rigidly on traditional instruments linked to habilitation - months of staying abroad - and direct contact hours), less rigid completion and defense processes, more info about best practices regarding completely virtual semester, more guidance on technical solutions taking into account GDPR and high level of protection of privacy.

**Could the COVID-19 outbreak result in increased demand of higher education?**

The increased unemployment in many sectors could lead to increased interest in attending university and getting an education. In Iceland, the Ministry of Education is already addressing this issue and has asked the universities for input.

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To conclude, the COVID-19 crisis can be considered as an opportunity to reflect upon and redefine the role and significance of HE in terms of “greater adherence to the values and principles underpinning education and the other traditional missions of the University”.

Not only the role of universities is vital in performing research on COVID-19, but moreover universities are called upon to play a crucial role in society by contributing to address the social and economic consequences of the pandemic.

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- University of Iceland, Iceland
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- Roma Tre University, Italy
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- Vilnius University, Lithuania
- University of Warsaw, Poland
- Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Portugal
- University of Bucharest, Romania
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- RUDN University, Russian Federation
- University of Belgrade, Serbia
- Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia
- University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
- Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain
- Stockholm University, Sweden
- University of Lausanne, Switzerland
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