

**BRIEFING**

# One year of Covid-19: the impact on European higher education

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The second global IAU survey “[Impact on Higher Education - One Year into the Covid-19 Pandemic](#)” has received a substantial and geographically well-spread response from 189 higher education institutions in 40 EHEA countries – representing 38% of the total sample. In respects, the responses of the European universities resemble those from other regions. As elsewhere in the world, universities in the European Higher Education Area<sup>1</sup> (EHEA) had to adjust to the lock-down and sanitary measures, and have suffered from planning uncertainty. However, in comparison with other regions, the Covid-19 crisis may have impacted them less severely, for instance regarding funding, enrolment numbers, and strategic reorientation. Moreover, in some areas, such as digital learning and teaching, the pandemic may have fostered and accelerated positive change. While the data shows some differences between Europe and other regions, one has to keep in mind the diversity within the EHEA, for example regarding the autonomy and financial support, that institutions enjoy.

## STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC

The Covid-19 crisis has been a shake-up for economies and societies, resulting in a reflection, possibly also a revision of established approaches. In light of the pandemic, almost three quarters of EHEA institutions plan to revise their central strategies, at least to some extent (63%). This includes 9% of institutions which indicate a major revision – relatively low compared to 21% worldwide. One can only speculate about the reasons: As public funding support continued, and in some countries was even enhanced for European institutions, the situation may not have called for drastic strategic changes. Another possible reason could be, that at many European institutions strategic change approaches, for example for digitally enhanced education, were already under preparation – and the crisis required acceleration and mainstreaming of already existing developments.

An illustrative example for this latter assumption are internationalisation strategies, which at the time of the data collection, a quarter of EHEA institutions had already revised due to the pandemic, and another 41% were discussing changes. Institutions point to an increased strategic focus on internationalisation of the curriculum, internationalisation at home (54%), and virtual exchanges and collaborative online learning (79%). Plans for the latter may have already been in place before the pandemic: at the start of the pandemic in 2020, 85% of institutions responding to an EUA survey state that they generally plan to emphasise digitalisation as a strategic priority in their collaboration with other institutions at international level<sup>2</sup>. But in the immediate, unsurprisingly, a negative trend can be observed in the EHEA in academic partnerships for mobility (at 46% of HEI). Academic partnerships for international collaborative learning were also decreased at a third of institutions.

The majority of the EHEA survey respondents (87%) is quite satisfied with their institutions' Covid-19 response, and some even report positive side effects from the crisis management, such as enhanced transversal collaboration between faculties and departments (to a great extent 32%, to some extent 56%). That said, nobody negates the deficiencies and shortcomings of the crisis. Most institutions believe that students tend to assess the crisis management positively (fully or somewhat) regarding the general communication, consultation and involvement of students in decision making, and management of the academic programmes. For student satisfaction regarding measures for physical and mental health about one third of institutions chose the response “non-applicable” - which might indicate that these services are provided by other structures than higher education institutions themselves.

<sup>1</sup> Which consist of 49 countries' respective higher education systems, including all of the European Union's. Further information: <http://ehea.info/>

<sup>2</sup> EUA (2021). Digitally enhanced learning and teaching in European higher education institutions, which reports early 2020 data. <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/954:digitally-enhanced-learning-and-teaching-in-european-higher-education-institutions.html>

## STUDENTS: RETENTION, ENROLMENT AND WELLBEING

The situation of students was certainly very stressful, given that 1.5 years of pandemic is a relatively long period of the time in a three- or four-year Bachelor programme, and in the life of a 20 year-old. It is intensive period of transition of life and career shaping nature, and hence of high expectations. In addition, students tend to have no steady income, but depend often on parents, grants and usually also on temporary employment – all factors that made them quite vulnerable in the crisis and enhanced their socio-economic vulnerability and potential mental distress. However, this may not have caused increased student drop-out: more than half of the EHEA institutions reported no change across all types of learners. This is also confirmed by an internal EUA survey of national university associations conducted in October 2021<sup>3</sup>, which found that there was no increase in dropouts in any of the higher education systems where such data was available at the national level. Three countries even reported enhanced retention.

More than a third of the EHEA institutions in the IAU survey reported an increase of domestic student enrolment, and only 12% a decrease - considerably lower than at institutions globally (21%) in enrolment of domestic students. This trend, which could already be observed in the years following the 2008 financial crisis<sup>4</sup>, is confirmed by EUA's national university association members<sup>5</sup>, of which almost half report increased domestic enrolment, the other half stable figures, and only one a decrease. Studying is perceived as a smart strategy to avoid unemployment and to enhance employability, in particular if tuition fees are low or not existent. In some systems, this is explored systematically, for instance in Finland and Norway, who offered funds for additional study places, explicitly in response to job loss or unemployment during the pandemic. In an even more targeted manner, Sweden financed additional short courses for lifelong learners and study programmes leading to professions where there is a shortage of labour in the country.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the pandemic has negatively impacted the numbers of international degree seeking students at EHEA institutions, similarly as in global average: 43% saw a decrease in enrolment of students from the same world region, 50% for students from other regions. Negative impact is especially evident for the numbers of exchange students (credit mobility), where 66% of EHEA institutions saw a decrease. But some EHEA institutions also reported increased international student numbers, especially for degree seeking students, (16% for students from Europe, and 12% for students from other world regions), but rarely for mobile students: only 5% state an increase of mobile students from the same world region, 4% from other regions. National university associations participating in EUA's survey in October 2021<sup>7</sup> confirm these general trends of international student enrolment, with slightly more positive figures for degree seeking international students (27% report an increase).

## EDUCATION AND RESEARCH IN AN UTTERLY CHANGED ENVIRONMENT

During the pandemic, higher education around the world largely switched to online provision. At the time of data collection, 89% of institutions worldwide and 92% in the EHEA offered remote learning and teaching. This ad-hoc shift of education provision brought accessibility challenges, as not all students were able to follow online learning. In international comparison, in Europe the situation for students to participate in online learning may have been slightly more favourable, than in the global average. In the EHEA 92% of institutions state that their students could access classes online, but only 86% globally. Two thirds of EHEA institutions and three quarters worldwide were able to provide additional support to their students,

3 EUA (forthcoming 2021). Universities' response to Covid 19 – state of play autumn 2021. A survey of national level university associations.

4 E.g. EUA (2015). Trends 2015: Learning and Teaching in European Universities. Available online : <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/388:trends-2015-learning-and-teaching-in-european-universities.html>

5 EUA (2021). The impact of Covid-19 on European higher education. Survey of National Rectors' Conferences – autumn/winter semester 2021/22. Available online: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/989:the-impact-of-covid-19-on-european-higher-education.html>

6 OECD (2021). The State of Global Education 18 Months into the Pandemic. Available online: [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/the-state-of-global-education\\_1a23bb23-en](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/the-state-of-global-education_1a23bb23-en)

7 EUA (2021). The impact of Covid-19 on European higher education. Survey of National Rectors' Conferences – autumn/winter semester 2021/22. Available online: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/989:the-impact-of-covid-19-on-european-higher-education.html>

including e.g. provision of devices to students in need (31% EHEA, 26% world). In almost a quarter of EHEA institutions, students with no access to remote learning were granted access to campus as a priority group.

In addition, there was clearly a need for staff development at many institutions when switching online: Only 28% of EHEA institutions state that the majority of their staff already had experience with online/distance learning and teaching prior to COVID-19. For 85% of institutions the crisis brought an increase in capacity building and training provision of technology use. Many institutions provided guidelines, pedagogical resources, opportunities for good practice sharing for staff, but also for students, in order to enable them to handle technology and learn more autonomously<sup>8</sup>.

Beyond changes in delivery modes and the enforced use of digital technology, the immediate impact on learning and teaching across the EHEA institutions may have been less drastic and radical than initially expected. Slightly higher than the global average, 45% of EHEA institutions report an impact of the pandemic on curricula, but most of them only for some specific programmes or courses. But overall, whether in Europe or globally, more than half of the institutions found that the pandemic did not provide any reason for curricula change.

While in the Summer semester 2020, examinations were identified as a key challenge, for the past semester or academic year, the vast majority of EHEA institutions (98%) was able to carry out exams as planned. Thus, also 71% of the EHEA institutions were able to graduate last year's cohort of students (62% world), and 24% most students (29% world). This may have been due to an improved sanitary situation, which allowed at least partial return to campus, at least for examinations; but 78% of institutions also indicate to have established new assessment formats, such as online/distance exams. In some higher education systems, national authorities, networks or institutions provided guidance on how to conduct online/remote assessments<sup>9</sup>. Already pre-pandemic, at 68% of EHEA institutions reported a growing trend towards digital assessment could be observed, either throughout the institution or at least in some faculties<sup>10</sup>. No doubt that the crisis has accelerated this development. Still open is what impact of the pandemic will have on learning and teaching in the long run: EUA's survey of university associations<sup>11</sup> found that by October 2021, only in two higher education systems' teaching continued fully online, as a temporary sanitary measure. But most respondents confirmed that increased use of blended learning, enhanced online services and generally a more flexible learning offer will continue beyond the crisis.

The impact of the pandemic on education missions received strong institutional level and public attention, certainly because it concerns large numbers of students and staff, and requires considerable planning and logistical effort. Research by contrast, was a commonly mentioned strategy and means to address the medical, technical and broader societal challenges brought on by the pandemic. Out of those EHEA institutions active in medical research, 38% report increased prioritization for research in this area. There has been an increase for almost a quarter of institutions in partnerships for research on health-related issues, and for private sector partnership for education technology. Funding for research is reported to be more stable in Europe (66%), with 10% of EHEA institutions noting an increase and 22% a decrease, compared to 30% reporting a decrease worldwide. In addition, several European higher education systems reported increases in ad-hoc competitive funding for research in health and medicine<sup>12</sup>.

8 A few examples are gathered in Coimbra group (2020). Practices in Coimbra Group Universities in response to Covid-19. Available online: <https://www.coimbra-group.eu/wp-content/uploads/Final-Report-Practices-at-CG-Universities-in-response-to-the-COVID-19.pdf>

9 EUA (2021). Digitally enhanced learning and teaching in European higher education institutions. Available online: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/954:digitally-enhanced-learning-and-teaching-in-european-higher-education-institutions.html>

10 EUA (2021). Digitally enhanced learning and teaching in European higher education institutions. Available online: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/954:digitally-enhanced-learning-and-teaching-in-european-higher-education-institutions.html>

11 EUA (2021). The impact of Covid-19 on European higher education. Survey of National Rectors' Conferences – autumn/winter semester 2021/22. Available online: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/989:the-impact-of-covid-19-on-european-higher-education.html>

12 EUA 2021. Public Funding Observatory 2020/2021. Part 1: Financial and economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis on universities in Europe. Available online: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/944:public-funding-observatory-2020-2021.html>

## INSTITUTIONAL VALUES AND CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY

The pandemic has also promoted a re-definition, or rethinking, of values at 42% of institutions in the EHEA (53% world), regarding equity of access (59%), non-discrimination and support for disadvantaged groups (53%), scientific integrity and research ethics (53%).

One cannot deny that during the pandemic, public authorities were more likely to interfere in higher education and research than usually. However, one has to consider that many of the public restrictions did not specifically target higher education institutions, but also other sectors of society, and therefore can hardly be perceived as a violation of autonomy and academic freedom. Likewise, pressure to focus research on Covid-19 related issues cannot be seen as governments' interference with institutional autonomy on this matter.<sup>13</sup> This is confirmed by about three quarters of the EHEA institutions, which report no effect of the pandemic on institutional autonomy and academic freedom. However, concerns about a deterioration institutional autonomy and academic freedom have been confirmed by 12% of the EHEA institutions, contrasted by 14% and 15% respectively reporting a positive development. A similar picture emerges in the world sample, with slightly more positive developments overall. In addition, there is anecdotal evidence that institutions in some systems were given higher levels of subsidiarity – probably mainly because central governments were not able to manage everything top-down. This however is not likely to result into enduring autonomy gains.

The pandemic has also positively impacted the role of higher education institutions as societal actors. For instance, 43% of EHEA institutions report an increase in community engagement activities, despite a decrease in expenditure in this area (reported by 36%). Furthermore, 64% of EHEA institutions (and three quarters around the world) are actively supporting the local community during the pandemic, for example through psychological support and mobile care for affected people (37% each), promotion of scientific knowledge and understanding to the general public (40%) and provision of expertise to local authorities (43%). For instance, in Austria, the national university association provided access to a network of university experts for the media in order to fight fake news with research-based evidence, in support of a broader public debate on possible solutions and consequences.<sup>14</sup> Overall, 34% of the EHEA institutions confirm that their collaboration with local and national authorities, and generally the contribution to policy making, has increased; but at half of the institutions, it also remained unchanged.

## HIGHER EDUCATION – A PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

There is probably not one Bologna Process Communiqué<sup>15</sup>, which has not been highlighting public responsibility and the important role of public funding for higher education. While exercised quite differently across the EHEA, this commitment and the fact that most European higher education institutions are by and large publicly funded, has shielded them from immediate economic and financial consequences of the crisis. To date, the financial impact of Covid-19 is comparatively moderate across Europe's higher education sector<sup>16</sup>. In the IAU survey, half of the EHEA institutions saw no changes in public funding due to the pandemic and 14% saw a decrease, whereas in the worldwide sample, almost a quarter saw decreases. Where applicable, income from tuition fees remained stable in more than half of the EHEA institutions, but decreased for a third. At least half of the EHEA institutions also report that their overall expenditure remained fairly stable, with notable – albeit not surprising – exceptions of decreased spending on international collaboration (for 61% of institutions), and community engagement (36%). In addition, a third noted increased infrastructure spending. More than half of the institutions with university hospitals saw an increase in spending on health.

<sup>13</sup> Bergan, Sjur (2021). Academic freedom and institutional autonomy: victims of the Covid-19 pandemic?. In council of Europe (2021). Higher education's response to the Covid-19 pandemic: Building a more sustainable and democratic future. Available online: <https://rm.coe.int/prems-006821-eng-2508-higher-education-series-no-25/1680a19fe2>

<sup>14</sup> uniko (2020). Corona: Expert\_innen der Universitäten gegen Fake News. <https://uniko.ac.at/newsroom/pressekit/index.php?ID=2849>

<sup>15</sup> Which mark the transition from one to the next phase of the Bologna Process, which aims at maintain and enhancing higher education cooperation and systems convergence across the EHEA. [www.ehea.info](http://www.ehea.info)

<sup>16</sup> EUA 2021. Public Funding Observatory 2020/2021. Part 1: Financial and economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis on universities in Europe. Available online: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/944:public-funding-observatory-2020-2021.html>

Overall, the IAU survey finds that 44% of EHEA institutions feel less concerned about the pandemic jeopardising their financial sustainability in the future, compared to 30% of the world sample. This might partially be due to the fact that a fifth of EHEA institutions indicate that they have received additional public support – they were 13% more likely to benefit from a governmental scheme providing emergency or special funding in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic than their counterparts around the world. EUA's Public Funding Observatory<sup>17</sup> confirms this for 22 higher education systems in Europe (EU countries, and the UK), where authorities have allocated additional funding for e.g. Covid-19 related research, student aid, investment in digital and physical infrastructure, and enhancement of research and teaching capacity. The study shows that for this sample of countries, also legal amendments to enact extraordinary rules, and information support by governments were quite common.<sup>18</sup> This aligns with the finding that EHEA institutions were a bit more positive in their assessment of governmental support, than institutions around the globe. Only 35% of EHEA institutions found government support lacking, compared to 43% in the world sample.

But any prediction on Europe's universities' post-crisis financial situation would be premature. The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis has shown that public funding cuts may arrive with a delay but can be significant and enduring. EUA's Public Funding Observatory found that most cuts took place in 2012.<sup>19</sup> While currently in Europe, unlike in 2008, the emphasis is not on austerity measures, but on investment for recovery, it would be naïve to assume that this will not impact the higher education institutions. The national university associations participating in EUA's Public Funding Observatory confirm that sector projections about future income are marked by high levels of uncertainty, and it is broadly expected that the main financial impact of the pandemic will be felt in a few years. This may concern public funding, but also the universities' own income from research and education.

## **CONCLUSION: WHAT CHANGES ARE GOING TO STAY, OR EVEN CONTINUE?**

The outbreak of the pandemic which hit universities in the summer semester 2020 came as a surprise and required immediate and ad-hoc action. In the academic year 2020/2021 - year two of the pandemic - higher education institutions seem to have been more adapt to the situation, due to adjusted strategies, organisational structures and technology resources. Partial reopening of campuses in spring and autumn 2021 are of course a promising first step towards a full return. But going into the new academic year, there is little planning security, as the sanitary situation may require another round of full or partial campus closures. In October 2021, several of EUA's national university association members were hesitant to provide information on the rules for this semester, as they were awaiting new decisions from their governments. In most EHEA countries, institutions cannot request staff and students to be vaccinated, and only 17 of the 48 EHEA countries have fully vaccinated population at 70% or higher<sup>20</sup>. Beyond the question of re-opening campuses, this is likely to result into continued challenges, probably less for degree mobility, but certainly for temporary mobility of students and staff. This concerns exchanges with global partners, but of course also exchanges within the EHEA and maybe even the European Union.

Beyond the ongoing pandemic, a big question is also how some of the changes that it evoked can benefit higher education. As the crisis situation pushed higher education institutions to change their mode of operation, some of these changes may be retained, and have also triggered reflections on further changes. At many institutions, leadership and staff have confirmed the opportunity for changes in learning and teaching, including but well beyond digital aspects; student wellbeing and inclusion receives increased attention, as the importance of the campus for informal learning and learning support has been confirmed; virtual mobility may be a bad substitute, but a great complement for physical mobility, and could make international cooperation much more fluid and interactive.

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* (p. 16)

<sup>19</sup> EUA 2021. The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on university funding in Europe. Available online : <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/927:the-impact-of-the-covid-19-crisis-on-university-funding-in-europe.html>

<sup>20</sup> On 17 Oct 2021 the WHO monitor shows Europe with a share of 54% fully vaccinated, and the EU with 64%. The lowest vaccination rates in the EHEA are 6% (Armenia), and in the EU 30% (Romania). <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>

But it also overall, of the ways of how higher education contributes to societies, in reflection of the economic and social changes that come with the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals and generally on the sustainability of the institution considering quality, economic and ecological aspects.

EUA's 2020 vision paper of a university without walls puts it as follows: "The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated change. This is leading to a rapid expansion in digital provision and research capacity to solve major societal challenges. This is likely to have a long lasting impact in the future. The knowledge base built by curiosity-driven basic research has been the foundation of a quick response to the challenge and should be preserved in order to prepare for future challenges."<sup>21</sup> This to happen will depend to some extent on the higher education institutions themselves, and a critical factor will of course be sufficient resources and funding. Hence continued and even enhanced public investment in higher education and research will be required, not only to keep them alive, but to enable them to contribute proactively to European and national strategies for technical, economic and social innovation in view of the grand challenges.

But it also requires sufficient levels of autonomy and generally, changes in the regulatory frameworks. In autumn 2020 EUA survey to national ministries in the EHEA, 16 out of 19 confirmed ongoing or planned changes in the legislation, to better align with and support formats of digitally enhanced learning, that during the pandemic became mandatory<sup>22</sup>. The present 2021-2024 Bologna Process phase could provide some evidence on these changes, and their impact.

<sup>21</sup> EUA 2021. Universities without walls A vision for 2030. (p. 5). Available online: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/957:universities-without-walls-%E2%80%93-eua%E2%80%99s-vision-for-europe%E2%80%99s-universities-in-2030.html>

<sup>22</sup> EUA (2021). Digitally enhanced learning and teaching in European higher education institutions. Available online: <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/954:digitally-enhanced-learning-and-teaching-in-european-higher-education-institutions.html>



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