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MINISTRY
OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE
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Agenda item 9

Parallel sessions

Background paper

on the implications of COVID-19 for the Bologna Process

The purpose of this paper is to stimulate discussion by the BFUG on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for the HE systems of the member countries as well as on the European Higher Education Area in its entirety. The results of the discussion will feed into the draft Rome Communiqué.

The global higher education landscape has dramatically changed in the past few months due to the outbreak of COVID-19. The pandemic has had unprecedented impact on higher education systems across European Higher Education Area: HEIs have been forced to close their campuses, switching overnight to online learning and teaching on a very large scale. To a certain extent this has boosted creativity and innovation. As the pandemic unfolds and new challenges arise, we see that some aspects of this transformation may become permanent, bringing us to think that a 'new normal' will be here to stay.

The crises has brought different issues to the foreground, affecting policy developments and funding of higher education. These range from **new forms of teaching and learning, which must be quality assured, and fully recognised cross-border mobility**, to guaranteeing adequate safety measures for reopening of institutions, while **assuring equity and equal learning opportunities for all**, and in particular for the most vulnerable groups of students.

New forms of L&T with quality assured and fully recognised cross-border mobility

With a sudden growth in off-campus digital-based education provisions, the issue of assuring high quality teaching and reliable assessment of intended learning outcomes becomes a pressing issue for HEIs across the EHEA. Traditional academic structures may need to be rethought, new modes of learning introduced, study programmes re-designed so that they include smaller units of learning such as micro-credentials and fast-track qualifications, in order to mitigate unemployment, but also to provide upskilling of people of all ages. In order to ensure fair recognition of qualifications and of all learning, adhering to the principles of the LRC, there is a need to establish trust in the quality assurance arrangements of new forms of teaching and learning, even now that they have been suddenly disrupted and rapidly



transformed. Clearly, adjustments must be developed, increasing of virtual mobility and developing new mobility patterns. According to some reports, the majority of international students still want to study in other countries, but the situation is changing from day to day. Nevertheless, although online classes cannot fully substitute for a physical mobility experience, the virtual alternative may be the only viable opportunity for international student mobility in the immediate future.

In order to respond to these challenges, HEIs will need to adapt and offer systematically on-line and blended learning while strengthening their international networks of collaboration using online modalities, sharing resources more than ever before.

Equity becomes important more than ever

The disruption of face to face teaching and learning has seriously challenged equal access to online learning tools for all students more than was foreseen. The most vulnerable groups of students have faced the biggest challenges in access, progression and completion of their studies. Therefore, equity, diversity and inclusion must be key considerations in designing the recovery process.

This challenge is coupled with that related to financing the technology and skills needed to implement digital education. It has also revealed substantial differences in the extent of equipment and preparedness not only of learners, but also of HE institutions and systems for the provision of online or blended learning.

The transformation to the new teaching and learning context with its indispensable digital component will require the pedagogical training of the academic staff. Institutions and governments need to support teachers and students in the shift to teaching and learning in virtual environments. They must recognize and tackle the feelings of isolation and social exclusion and the anxiety and stress that comes from not knowing what will happen.

A continuous and even more intensive cooperation within the EHEA is needed

Comprehensive data collection and use of data to support policy-makers to make evidence-based decisions, to inform and inspire post-COVID planning is a must in order to design and implement a coordinated and strategic response to the crisis. There needs to be an impact assessment looking at the final outcome of the crisis and the long-term consequences of the pandemic for learning and teaching, including student mobility, in the future. Moreover, peer learning will be important to foster innovations in further policy developments and dissemination of good practice.

In light of the above, the BFUG members are invited to focus on the following questions:

1. What can governments do to overcome the impacts of the crisis, to anticipate further disruptions and to support HEIs and students in the aftermath of COVID-19? How can we support one another to leverage the lessons learned and improve our ability to face similar crises in the future?
2. What can be done to support the recovery of international student mobility, encouraging new forms of international cooperation and mobility, in order to consolidate a key feature of the European Higher Education Area?
3. How can we best deal with the challenges to assuring the quality of teaching and learning for all groups of students in the new and alternative forms of delivery, ensuring that institutions look at the effects of the measures they take through the lens of equity?
4. Do you see a potential for digital solutions supporting efficient administrative procedures in all policy areas? Where, specifically?

Various organizations have published initial analyses and forecasts on the effects of COVID-19 on education in the short, medium and long term. The sources listed below have been used in the drafting of this note.

However, as the situation unfolds, and due to the fast changing nature of the crisis, these topics will need to be continuously revisited and examined from different viewpoints, considering both current and potential future developments.

Sources:

[O'Malley, Brendan. \(2020\), Impact of crisis on HE will be large and long-lasting – EUA.](#)

[The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on university funding in Europe. Lessons learnt from the 2008 global financial crisis. EUA, May 2020.](#)

[Implications for the global higher education campus. UNESCO, COVID-19 Education Response Webinar, 15 May 2020. Synthesis report.](#)

[Recognition of foreign qualifications in times of COVID-19. A reflection document for the ENIC NARIC Networks and their Stakeholders. Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee Bureau, ENIC-Bureau and the NARIC Advisory Board, with support of the Co-Secretariats. \(14 May 2020\).](#)

[Murphy, Michael. Universities beyond the coronavirus crisis – What awaits? \(2 May 2020\).](#)

[The Impact of the Coronavirus on Global Higher Education. QS survey. \(2020\)](#)

[Rumbley, Laura E. \(2020\), Coping with COVID-19: International higher education in Europe. The European Association for International Education \(EAIE\).](#)

[Gabriels, W., Benke-Aberg, R., \(2020\). Student Exchanges in Times of Crisis - Research report on the impact of COVID-19 on student exchanges in Europe. Erasmus Student Network AISBL.](#)

[Effect of the COVID-19 on higher education and recognition. Informative note for HEIs. CIMEA. \(April, 2020\).](#)

[How should students be admitted to higher education this year? Eurydice.](#)

[Recognition of qualifications in this time of Coronavirus. CoE April 2020.](#)

[Egron-Polak, Eva. The world after COVID-19. Academic Cooperation Association.](#)

Results of the EU education ministers' discussions at the ministerial video conferences organised during Croatia's Presidency of the Council of the European Union.