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## **Split BFUG meeting: Report from the discussions on the parallel sessions on the implications of COVID-19 for the Bologna Process**

The BFUG, in its online meeting hosted by Croatia in June 2020, was invited to discuss 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 two parallel sessions were held, one focusing on the students' perspective and informed by the preliminary findings of the survey carried out by the ESU, Institute for Development of Education, Croatia and the University of Zadar, Croatia and the other focusing on the HEIs perspective informed by the preliminary findings of the survey carried out by the EUA.

The background for the discussion was that the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 outbreak has had unprecedented impact on higher education systems across the European Higher Education Area: HEIs have been forced to close their campuses, switching overnight to online learning and teaching, on a very large scale. 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 crisis 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.

The discussion was structured around 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?

Several messages can be drawn from the discussions at the parallel sessions.

### **COVID-19 Implications from the students' perspective**

The preliminary results of the Survey were presented and the participants were asked to discuss what public authorities can do to support students, teachers and institutions i.e. what policy recommendations can the BFUG take forward to secure a resilient EHEA and what can ministers do to strengthen European HE in face of the COVID pandemic.

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 outbreak accentuated current challenges. The switch to remote teaching and learning was efficient but this was, however, education in the time of emergency and not a sustainable switch to proper distance education. The work of the BFUG AG on social dimension becomes even more relevant.

The following list of measures came out from the discussion:

- The ESU survey demonstrated that the students feel lack of stability and a significant number report to face mental health problems and losing work opportunities (including work placements) and considerations about the future. Therefore, the governments and the institutions need to cater for the wellbeing of their students and teachers. A support to teachers and counselling of students needs to be assured.
- The BFUG has been working for a long time on removing obstacles to physical mobility. Now, we are faced with some new obstacles for mobility and they need to be addressed as well by the ministers.
- However, safe physical mobility is still important for students to acquire European values. Commitment to allow free movement needs to be highlighted in the Rome Communiqué because restrictions for free movement caused by COVID-19 have become an issue for mobile students.
- There is a need to improve the quality of online learning and teaching since it seems reasonable to expect that the future will bring a necessity to integrate at a large scale online learning and teaching with more traditional forms.
- If the study period is extended funding needs to be assured. Scholarships should be prolonged where possible.
- There is a challenge of an adequate infrastructure for accessibility of a good quality of teaching and learning resources. There is a need to provide right devices to all the students.
- There is a digital gap between the institutions and the teachers within institutions. Therefore, the digital skills of teachers need to be improved.
- Consequently, a sustainable public investment in HE is needed so that students have access to digital tools to reduce inequalities caused by the crisis and to have professional development of academics.
- Teachers and students need to have access to a good quality learning material.
- We need to take a holistic approach when looking for students' conditions for studying. Quality teaching is important but also what kind of support they have (financial support,

leaving conditions). Looking at the social structure of students we see that students, who depend on jobs have been losing them.

- We need to distinguish between immediate and mid- to and long-term impact of disruption caused by COVID and create the measures accordingly.
  - Short term solutions: flexibility in study times and extra support that students can pick up their studies and resources and reformed guidance to students
  - Medium- and long-term solutions – importance from moving from emergency responses to long term investments
- There is a need to continue with research on the impact of COVID on studying.
- There is a lot to be done in terms of improving quality of online teaching and learning and in particular in relation to skills development and practical elements of curricula and appropriate assessment methods.
- There is a need to assure flexibility in recognition because the effect of pandemic should not be an obstacle to recognition.
- We may expect a gradual return to normal – the new normal will have a higher degree of blended learning and hopefully, not total switch to online learning.

### **COVID-19 Implications from the Higher Education Institutions' perspective**

The parallel session commenced with presentation of the preliminary results of the survey on digitally enhanced learning carried out under the DIGI-HE project by EUA and partners during April-June 2020. Following that, the participants were invited to discuss prospective ways in which the Bologna Process can contribute to mitigating the impact of the crisis on the higher education sector and enhancing learning and teaching within the frame of a 'new normal'.

As demonstrated, COVID-19 has impacted all missions and actions of higher education institutions. Despite the lack of previous online teaching experience for most teachers, HEIs have coped quite well with the emergency remote teaching mode. Enabling factors for universities became their resilience to undergo a number of organisational changes, which required leadership, flexible and supportive management and participatory approach, and which was possibly due to institutional autonomy – which in some places seems to have increased during the crisis, and the fact that higher education is a public responsibility.

Flexibility is important at other levels as well. Primarily at the governmental level, to allow the HEIs and students to adapt to the new situation, which may include the possibility to prolong the academic year, if that is required to complete all the requirements. More flexibility is needed in the Erasmus programme, by means of blended mobility, especially with the aim to create virtual international environment in order to reach the goal of 100% mobility, including virtual. Finally, everyone involved needs to be especially flexible in regard to disadvantaged students.

The role of the Bologna Process in ensuring further resilience of HEIs in the EHEA could be seen in advocating against funding cuts for HEIs as well as higher education becoming collateral of the recovery processes.

The crisis is seen by many HEIs as an opportunity to enhance their digital capacity and redesign their curricula. In some institutions, students are heavily involved in this, by contributing to the development and testing. There is also an urgent need to ensure proper digital upskilling for teachers and students. The blended approach is currently considered as the key learning mode for the next academic year, especially as some students are reluctant to be on campus. In addition to that, the unemployment made it harder for the students to find part time work, sometimes necessary to help finance their studies.

A sharp shift to distance and blended education modes also necessitates revisiting of quality assurance mechanisms, transparency tools, and recognition procedures. Fair learning assessments have to be enabled in the digital learning environment. Also, the ECTS needs to be fully utilized to reflect properly the students' workload in the distance and blended learning environment.

In case of professional higher education, a 'new normal' has facilitated a novel balance among conceptual theoretical learning, hands-on training, and digital opportunities. This balance has promising implications for lifelong learning provision and the potential rise in entrepreneurial professionals as opposed to the employed.

Another beneficial discovery of the crisis relates to the concept of microcredentials: their characteristics have been reflected in the competence-based, short, and diversified provision of higher education.

Virtual mobility is still perceived differently among various higher education stakeholders. With that, there is an understanding that virtual international environments are to be created as a complementary approach to physical mobility of students and staff.

A surge in unemployment led to various admission patterns across the EHEA countries: some experience increased enrolment rates that could potentially be disruptive in terms of their financial and human resource sustainability in the long run; others face shrinking interest on the side of prospective students. As regards attracting and retaining international students in the next academic year, it is largely contingent upon cooperation between ministries of education and ministries of foreign affairs.

It is of utmost significance to consider the mental health of HEIs staff who are put under substantial pressure and made to work harder to find solutions to the emerging issues.

There is a shared understanding that students' services, social security mechanisms and measures to secure their well-being, especially with regard to the disadvantaged, have to be redefined. The crisis has also had negative implications on doctoral candidates, i.e., their funding prospects, mental health, laboratory work, international cooperation, and potential freeze in job opportunities after graduation.

*Note by the Croatian and Ukrainian Co-chairs of the BFUG:*

*We recommend that the results of the discussion feed into the draft Rome Communiqué and that the discussion continues under the co-chairmanship of Germany and United Kingdom/United Kingdom-Scotland. We believe that, 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.*