



The impact of COVID-19 on higher education: a review of emerging evidence

NESET Analytical Report, 2021
Summary

This analytical report provides a synthesis of the emerging evidence on what impact COVID-19 has on three specific aspects of higher education in Europe: teaching and learning; the social dimension of higher education (i.e. the effect on underrepresented, vulnerable and disadvantaged learners); and student mobility.

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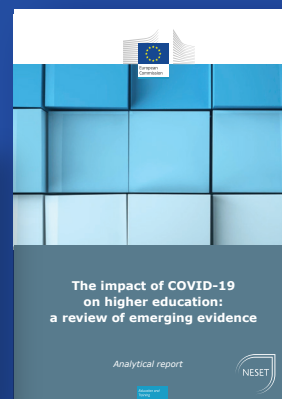
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Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on higher education worldwide in virtually all aspects of its functioning. Approximately 220 million higher education students have been affected by the disruption caused by COVID-19, leaving policymakers and educational institutions with unprecedented challenges such as how to mitigate learning losses, how to deploy remote learning, how to safely reopen educational institutions and how to ensure that underrepresented, vulnerable and disadvantaged learners are not left behind.

The report

The analytical report provides a synthesis of the emerging evidence on what impact COVID-19 has had on higher education in Europe, with a special focus on three thematic areas: teaching and learning; the social dimension of higher education (i.e. the effect on underrepresented, vulnerable and disadvantaged learners); and student mobility. Drawing upon 14 rapid-response surveys carried out in 2020 by university networks, student organisations and researchers, as well as over 50 journal articles, reports and publications, the analytical report synthesises emerging evidence into three levels of impact of COVID-19: **immediate impact**, **short-term impact** and **medium-term impact**.

Key findings

Teaching and learning

The sudden move to 'emergency remote teaching' by virtually all higher education institutions due to the COVID-19 pandemic was a logistical challenge, a challenge for teaching staff (to adapt their teaching methods and assessment to online delivery), and for students (to both access course content and to successfully deal with their study workload in radically different circumstances). Although the overall assessment of emergency remote teaching was positive, numerous open questions remain, including: how to ensure the quality of online learning, how to support teaching staff and students to be better prepared for online teaching and how to avoid the risk of disengagement and drop-out of students.

Social dimension of higher education

Underrepresented, vulnerable and disadvantaged groups were disproportionately affected by the impact of COVID-19 on higher education, in terms of perceived learning losses, financial concerns and lower levels of mental health and well-being. In turn, students with lower levels of mental health and well-being face a greater risk of drop-out. The effects of COVID-19 on deteriorating educational equality in pre-tertiary education are also likely to have a direct effect on lowering the level of participation of disadvantaged groups in higher education.

International student mobility

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international student mobility in the short and medium term has been immense, characterised by cancellations of physical mobility and its replacement with 'virtual mobility' via emergency remote teaching. Overall challenges include providing international students with adequate academic and psychological support, whether they are based on-campus or abroad. Other challenges exist for 'third country' students who face challenges with student visas and residence permits. The main open question facing international student mobility in the medium term (up till 2025) is how universities will cope with decreases in enrolments of international students and how they will support those who have decided to enrol in 'virtual mobility' or blended mobility programmes.

Key recommendations

Public authorities:

Support higher education institutions to upgrade and redesign their curricula for online delivery and ensure the necessary infrastructure for such delivery.



Set up system-level schemes to further support access, retention and completion of underrepresented, vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in higher education.

Stimulate the goal of international collaboration in higher education, including student mobility, redirecting funds originally intended for physical mobility to creative solutions such as 'internationalisation at home' strategies, and high-quality virtual mobility.

Higher education institutions:

Support both academic staff and students to better adapt teaching/learning in an online environment.

Provide additional academic, psychological and financial support to vulnerable groups of students to prevent their disengagement and drop-out.



Set up support measures to ensure that international students receive appropriate academic and psychological support and that, during course delivery, they have equal access to online learning tools.

Ensure more flexibility to enable students to successfully achieve their learning outcomes.

