HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE COVID ERA:
Shaping the Future of Euro-Med Institutions

14-15 September 2021
Izola, Slovenia

#Internationalisation @ Home

#Digital Transformation

University EMUNI

in partnership with

Union for the Mediterranean
Union pour la Méditerranée
الإتحاد من أجل المتوسط

About the event

Conference theme

The conference aimed at reflecting on the impact of the pandemic – a significant disturbance to our lives across the world – on the higher education sector, particularly in the context of the Euro-Mediterranean region. At the focus were two of the key domains of higher education institutions; the mission of fostering internationalisation and digital transformation. The conference sought to depict the impacts and consider the responses to existing challenges.

Rationale

The relevance of the topic was restated by speakers at the high levels of the Slovenian government and the UfM Secretariat. Some forthcoming events will pave the way for effective cooperation in the region in the domains of science and education: the UfM Ministerial on Research and Innovation to take place in June 2022, and the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference to be held in Barcelona from 18 to 20 May 2022. As previously expressed by the UfM Secretary General in different occasions, a new Ministerial meeting on Higher Education and Research, after almost 15 years, would also be welcome.

Conference in numbers

84
Participants

26
Speakers

15 Countries
and International Organisations

Panel 1

Towards a Euro-Mediterranean higher education and research area

The Cairo Declaration revisited

The panel included mostly speakers who, in one way or the other, played an instrumental role in the Ministerial Conference on Higher Education and Scientific Research, held in Cairo in June 2007, which lead to the adoption of the Cairo Declaration. They restated the role of education in the development of any country as well as in building peace and tolerance among them and reminded of the significance of networks in support of the Barcelona process or the Euro-Mediterranean partnership.This is precisely the reason for which EMUNI was created in 2008. While often invoked, the notion of a "dialogue" is of secondary significance to the ultimate goal of "sharing" and creating a shared space.

The discussions around how to best use **educational technologies** are not new and had been held at least since the 1990s. The panellists highlighted such statements as "we seem to continually invest hope in them and at the same time underuse them". There are growing possibilities enabled by ICT, as these stretch beyond just "doing teaching via internet connection". Much worse than recognising the potential of ICT, is the understanding of what works in a specific environment, as there is no "one-size-fits-all" model. Furthermore, in some instances a disagreement is to be noted among the stakeholders in so far as the question of distance teaching and learning is concerned. For instance, it is quite intriguing to note while the management of universities is pushing for a return of face-to-face, students often want to have as many lessons as possible online.

Science-policy interface and international research collaboration

Another under-used tool in the context of a common research area is **communication of science and research findings**, particularly as part of the science-policy interface. Science is often pointing to the needed policy measures, but politicians need to be persuaded to act on the scientific recommendations. Here, more cooperation will increase the power of persuasion.

Collaboration, particularly through established networks, plays an important role in motivating individuals to retain strong linkage among countries, universities and faculties, and also allow these scholars and researchers to stay where they are and contribute to the development and prosperity of their countries, rather than fleeing abroad in support of better scientific facilities and work conditions.

Cooperation in research also has a role to play in reducing the vulnerability of societies, an aspect that the pandemic brought to the spotlight. The absence of early warning systems in medicine can be mitigated by stronger collaboration. An essential component of collaboration is multi-and inter-disciplinarity and ethics, including research integrity.
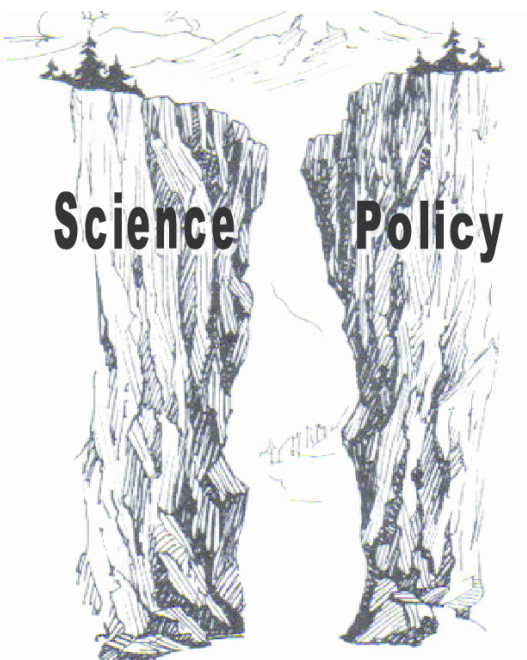
Panel 2

Internationalisation of today: Has the pandemic brought us closer or further apart?

"The aim is not to have internationalisation per se, but to apply skills gained through internationalisation."

In terms of **thematic priorities,** no area is immune from benefits of internationalisation activities. However, health, climate change, renewable energies and capacity building seem to be among the top areas of concern. When thinking about the content, a difference between international and intercultural aspect of internationalisation should be acknowledged. The intercultural dimension has been significantly more affected during the pandemic and should be duly considered.

In terms of **stakeholders**, the management of universities, academic and administrative staff and policy makers all play an important role, but other key stakeholders – and often overlooked – are the students. Students should not be perceived as participants to internationalisation, they are actors and often, drivers of it. The EU continues to be an indispensable element to the internationalisation in the region (through Erasmus programmes and funds), and the South Mediterranean region is the most financed among the regions. While the EU and the European Commission could perhaps do more, national governments are lagging behind much more in their efforts to support internationalisation.

In terms of **instruments,** human mobility should remain a priority, particularly in light of the effect the pandemic has caused, despite more challenging circumstances to travel and interact. From the point of EU funds, mobility of academic and administrative staff and students, incoming and outgoing, remains a key instrument. However, it is sobering to know that 90% of students do not have possibility for a mobility. Thus, a variety of other instruments for internationalisation are important and are needed. For instance, internationalisation of curricula and staff, jointly contributing to internationalisation at home, the significance of which is under-appreciated. The MED2IaH project, coordinated by EMUNI, that brings together 17 partners from 9 countries funded by the Erasmus+ capacity building programme is focusing on this. In the mid-term, the following three priorities will shape the EU-funded projects in the new Erasmus + programme: social inclusion, digitalisation, and green mobility, as set by the European Commission. Many of the activities have already been piloted before (virtual mobility, support for green travelling etc.) but will now be reinforced.

In terms of **improvements** to further accelerate internationalisation, attention should be paid to well-known challenges, namely the indicators for measuring progress, an unbalanced cooperation (since South to North cooperation is much more popular than North to South or South to South), and a fragmented approach to recognition of acquired skills. To move ahead on the challenges, we need to be bolder and more concrete than so far. For instance, concrete strategies beyond establishing and improving the internet connection are needed to support digitalisation. Other examples of concrete actions are fostering creation of student networks, including in the South; supporting capacity building programmes and trainings, rewarding people for blended mobility and virtual mobility, reinforcing South to South, and North to South mobility.

Foremost, we need to be treating the internationalisation as an instrument to closer cooperation, based on equal footing. The aim is not to have internationalisation per se, but to apply skills, gained through internationalisation.

Panel 3

Digital readiness of HEIs in the region: How has the pandemic impacted the digital transformation of higher education?

"Big financial investments are not necessarily a condition to an effective uptake of digital approaches"

"A recurring theme is one of digital capabilities of the academic staff."

With regards to evaluating the **impact of the pandemic** on universities, we need to be talking about different phases as well as about different universities. In the first phase, immediately after the outbreak, universities mostly switched their classes online and effectively, offered lessons via internet – that is, where a stable internet connection is possible at all – a very tangible issue that continues to pose a challenge in parts of the Mediterranean region. Availability of internet certainly mitigated the negative impact of the pandemic on the universities. Gradually, universities were able to adjust their method of teaching, and here a considerable modification in the delivery could have taken place. The scope of progress is mostly subject to motivation and capacity of academic staff in using and developing (new) online resources, but also subject to the availability of technical support by professional providers of online learning. With the height of the pandemic gradually over, the students tend to be much keen on continuing with remote learning than is the management of universities and staff. Overall, a common impression is that the process of capitalising on opportunities for online learning (which is quite distinct from remote lecturing) could have gone further and extended to more universities.

In terms of mapping the efforts that go beyond "lecturing with the help of internet", more is happening than that which is typically visible to universities or the majority of academic teaching staff. Some universities, e.g. Ulysseus European University, are joining forces to engage their stakeholders (researchers, students and businesses) and explore the opportunities of innovation and technologies, including artificial technologies. This allows them to act as 'test beds' of the future. Others, like EMUNI, are encouraging their staff to develop innovative online resources or are contracting external learning designers to build material and design courses, relying on the latest knowledge on cognitive processes in online environments. Still others are developing innovative learning tools, drawing on gamification and concepts like avatars, to outperform students' experience with physical teaching, e.g. for purposes of simulation of rare real-world scenarios – see the MyScore software, developed at the University of Aachen. Apart from teaching, digital transformation spans also other areas of work, e.g. student acquisition, archiving, libraries. Digital transformation is not only about technology – often, too much emphasis is placed on linking these two.

As such, big **financial investments** are not necessarily a condition to an effective uptake of digital approaches. When speaking only about digital course development, if this is done right, it can yield benefits in better structuring and planning, enabling re-usability and adjustments, extending also to the delivery of face to face instruction, and thus result in financial savings. One should also recall the existence of Open Educational Resources, which are freely accessible. While certainly one of the factors, finances are not the key factor for deployment of digital opportunities.

A recurring theme is one of **digital capabilities** of the academic staff. While the level of digital skills in higher education is typically higher than the primary and secondary education, there is generally an age gap to be observed between the digital skills and expectations of the young generations on the one hand and their professors and mentors on the other. University management can encourage and provide incentives to the academic staff to upgrade their online skills and offer trainings. Development of digital skills of the academic staff can go hand in hand with their internationalization activities.

While the onus of creating an encouraging environment is on the university management, national regulation also has a role to play, e.g. through incentives for digitalisation, financial support to digital hubs, requirements for open science etc.

For universities, online resources today are **a question of quality** and not only modality (either-or). The ultimate aim of deploying digital solutions is facilitating a set of hybrid skills for a competent and ethical action in both the digital and the analogue worlds. Thus, a balance is to be found between online interaction as a complement, rather than a replacement of physical contact among students and between students and professors.

KEY MESSAGES

The process of Euro–Mediterranean integration is not complete

The pandemic has highlighted the value-added of cooperation among universities, improving their resilience, quality, attractiveness, and power vis-à-vis policymaking.

To the UfM, EU, Arab League and Euro-Med institutions as well as individual countries: Develop effective and functional science-policy interfaces among universities and policymakers to facilitate informed decision making addressing current and future challenges in the region.

Further internationalization is an imperative

Internationalisation is an ongoing process that is never accomplished for universities, albeit with changing priorities, and involves an international and intercultural dimension.

To university management, staff and students across the region and to Southern Mediterranean policy-makers: Continue exploiting all tools, from mobility to internationalisation at home, paying particular attention to supporting the South to South and North to South flows.

Smart ed–tech is a paradigm shift

The pandemic has emphasised the importance and potential of a systematic approach to digital transformation at various operational levels, from course design to teaching, library access and administration etc.

To University Management: Plan and invest in the smart use of educational technologies, at all level of universities, encompassing integration of digital technologies and organisation of processes.