

A DEFINING MOMENT: CAN WE PREDICT THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION?

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| 3 |

In the past century, the world has witnessed devastating global events that transformed the way we live, work and educate. This includes outbreaks, such as the 1918 Flu pandemic (aka Spanish Flu), wars, including the 1st and 2nd World Wars and economic crises, like the great depression of 1929. Obviously, in the short-term, these events caused massive disruption in our lives, however, in the long-term, they spurred great technological innovations and scientific developments that better our adaptiveness. For example, the 1918 pandemic ushered in fundamental advancements in science and medicine, including cultivating viruses in laboratories for study (1931) and developing flu vaccines (late 1930s).

It is a testament to the progress of science and medicine that it took our scientific community less than a year to develop, test and manufacture the Covid vaccine. Yet, despite our greater response capacity, given our highly mobile and interconnected societies, the consequences of the 2019 Pandemic are likely to be unprecedented in terms of persistence and impact. The Covid pandemic will be regarded by future generations as a significant episode in human history, with its socio-economic and political implications reaching far and wide.

The implications on higher education were immediately perceived at the onset of the pandemic. The sudden lockdown and forced closure of educational institutions left educators in uncharted territory. Universities were forced to adapt, replacing classroom teaching with online education; faculty members



and staff struggled to couple conventional teaching and learning methodologies with technologically innovative pedagogies. However, the long-term impact of the pandemic on higher education institutions (HEIs) depends, to a large extent, on pre-pandemic global trends, including internationalization of higher education and digital transformation, just to name a few.

The paradigm shift to online education is part of the wider digital transformation that started in recent decades. This necessary transformation is not limited to technologies and infrastructure but includes building educators' capacities for online teaching and novel means of instruction, building the capacity of administrative and support staff to effectively utilize the virtual learning environment, and expanding the traditional educators' teams to include online learning designers and cognitive experts. This also implies integrating digital transformation in HEI's strategies and ensuring the "buy-in" of staff members, students, and other stakeholders.

Internationalization in higher education can be measured by the number of foreign students enrolled in universities outside of home, the short-term mobilities for study abroad, foreign academic staffing in higher education institutions, the volume and extent of international research collaboration and publications, to name a few elements. While the pandemic created challenges to the continued mobility of students, staff and researchers, it became clear that the associated digital transformation is offering opportunities to pursue effective collaboration through virtual communication and online work technologies. The crisis also provided a strong argument for international research collaboration, contributing to advancing global knowledge and developing vaccines. The positive attitude among scientists and governments towards cross-border collaboration in research is likely to endure, and maybe even intensify, post-pandemic.

Seen in terms of compounding already existing problems, the Covid crisis is an opportunity for change within the HE institutions and an invitation to reinvent answers for already existing questions:

- What are the hallmarks of the digital transformation? What challenges and opportunities it offers?



- What constitutes quality online education? Are there standards?
- How can we attain digital readiness in our institutions?
- How can internationalization be practically applied in the era of Covid?
- Will science remain an international enterprise?
- Basically, can we foresee the future of higher education and research institutions?

To respond to these questions and others, EMUNI is organizing a conference titled “Higher Education in the Covid era: Shaping the future of Euro-Mediterranean institutions”. This event will take place in Piran, Slovenia in September 2021, alongside the meeting of the University bodies that will discuss the revised strategy of EMUNI to address the post Covid higher education and research changing landscape.