

Situation of European universities after Covid-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on higher education institutions across Europe. The disruption caused by the pandemic has forced universities to adapt, innovate, and grapple with a range of challenges (Farnell et al., 2021). Initially, the pandemic triggered swift and improvised reactions during the spring and summer semesters of 2020. Universities had to hastily transition to remote learning and implement health and safety measures. The gradual reopening of campuses was considered a hopeful step towards a return to normal mode. Yet, uncertainties lingered regarding contingency plans, as full or partial campus closures remained possible depending on the ever-evolving health situation (Smith, 2021).

The pandemic disrupted student and staff mobility, particularly in exchange programs with global partners, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and potentially within the European Union. Travel restrictions, quarantine requirements, and the uncertain health landscape created obstacles for traditional mobility initiatives (European University Association. (2022)). Students experienced disturbances regarding their mental health, social interactions and access to resources, especially international students whose mobility was negatively affected by the pandemic, bringing exchange programs and research collaborations to almost zero.

European universities transitioned to online and blended learning models during the pandemic. The digital transformation, including the adoption of new technologies, digital tools and online resources (Smith et al., 2020) triggered a profound innovation in teaching and learning with the implementation of innovative teaching methods, and remodeled pedagogical approaches with a system of continuous assessment of the quality of blended learning. Digital technologies, when used appropriately, offer innumerable benefits to the students as they allow for the fast-tracking of the [learning process](#). For instance, they can serve as the hub for knowledge broadcasting and knowledge exchange, wherein information and knowledge flow freely not only from teachers to students, but also amongst students as well (Mhlongo et al., 2023).

Most students have experienced online classes for the first time. Variables such as interaction in the online class, student motivation to participate in the online class, course structure, and instructor facilitation and knowledge are important determinants of perceived student learning

and student satisfaction. Online student engagement is a stronger determinant of the perceived student learning outcome as online classes lack physical socialization (Baber, 2020). It is inferred that to overcome some of the limitations of blended learning, lecturers can develop interactive tasks to enhance the engagement, motivation and academic performance of students in online environments (McHone, 2020). Furthermore, qualitative evidence suggests that students find face-to-face learning superior to blended learning because the social elements typically associated with in-person classes may not be adequately integrated into online etiquette frameworks. But there are limited studies that delve into how students view face-to-face (F2F) and blended learning (BL) when Covid-19 is not a factor (Dafydd Mali, Hyoungjoo Lim, 2021).

The possibilities of blended models with the use of mobile learning in higher education are almost unlimited. Mobile devices always provide the access to connect with students. With this connection, you can instantly send quick messages and notifications about new additions to mobile training materials and segments. You can use this link to send reminders to students, for example, about incomplete modules. Mobile devices also allow the student to easily respond to short surveys about the content of a particular course, as well as allow them to make suggestions or report any problems with the performance of the lesson platform (Makarchuk et al., 2013)

There are also limitations regarding blended learning because there are still students who are unaccustomed to this recent educational trend and require much scaffolding and support in learning to learn autonomously. This necessitates significant effort from the teacher(s) and designer(s) to deliver such courses effectively. Secondly, transactional distance created by the online part of a BL course may be difficult for students unaccustomed to self-management and in consequence lead to a failure. Thirdly, the proper design of the online component of a blended learning course is a highly challenging task which requires sound pedagogic and technical skills. Finally, online environments are frequently treated like an easy and cheap option to traditional learning, especially in the context of blended learning. They are viewed as a panacea for all shortcomings of a traditional education system, insufficiently skilled teachers and unmotivated, bored students. Obviously, such understanding of blended learning, or more widely – e-learning, is a misapprehension as severe as the belief that computers may replace a human teacher (Bzdak, 2009).

Despite the wide variance in experiences with emergency remote teaching, it is likely that blended practices that combine both online and in-person instruction will become increasingly prevalent across all educational sectors. Scholars have an opportunity to help institutions, instructors, and learners to understand research that can guide and improve blended learning

practices. Additionally, there is still much research to do as we need to better understand how different blended models and pedagogical practices within those models work to improve learning outcomes, increase access and flexibility for learners, and impact cost efficiencies (Graham and Halverson, 2023).

In the post-Covid period, governments globally acknowledge the critical role of universities in driving economic recovery, innovation, and social development. To support higher education institutions in this new landscape, many governments have implemented a range of policies and initiatives such as financial support by allocating substantial funding to universities to address the financial challenges brought on by the pandemic. Notably, investments in digital infrastructure are prioritized, with funds allocated to augment universities' online teaching and learning capacities. This strategic support ensures equitable access to high-quality education for students, irrespective of their geographical location, underscoring the indispensable role of universities in shaping tech solutions for blended learning.

Government policies were geared toward ensuring the resilience, sustainability, and quality of higher education. A number of industrial countries — among them Denmark, France, Finland, Germany, Singapore, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States — have rapidly approved economic rescue packages that include support for colleges, universities and/or students. They were primarily intended to help public colleges and universities weather the crisis by protecting the employment of most administrative and academic staff, boosting student welfare, and helping with the cost of the technology needed for a smooth transition to online education. France and Germany provided emergency financial aid targeting students who have lost their part-time jobs and/or access to subsidized residence halls. Austria gave an additional semester of financial aid to all eligible students regardless of their academic results (IMF, 2020).

As the post pandemic situation continues to evolve, universities and governments in the European Higher Education Area are likely to face ongoing challenges in ensuring the health and safety of students and staff, while also aiming to provide high-quality education. Flexibility, adaptability, and effective communication with relevant authorities were crucial in navigating the uncertain landscape presented by the pandemic. Additionally, lessons learned from this experience may shape the future of higher education in terms of technology integration and preparedness for similar crises.

Campus closures in the future could occur based on the changing hygienic conditions, but the partial reopening of campuses was a positive step toward a return to normalcy for the higher education industry. Another challenge is the need to harmonize permanent and reliable

infrastructures and strategies for blended learning across institutions. Blended and hybrid teaching has become the new norm, emphasizing a mix of physical and virtual learning environments and a focus on asynchronized teaching (Reimers et al., 2020).

In conclusion, the situation of European universities post-COVID-19 is marked by adaptation and uncertainty, but also by the potential for positive transformation. The higher education sector must navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by the pandemic, embracing innovative approaches and maintaining a strong focus on the student experience and inclusive education. Collaboration, knowledge sharing, and effective change management will be essential in shaping the future of higher education in Europe (Brown & Johnson, 2023).