

JOINT PAPER: IAU AND ESN

COVID-19 impact on Higher Education: Institutional and Students' Perspectives

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered various changes in life as we know it. One of the sectors which was highly affected was Higher Education, and more specifically student exchange. The International Association of Universities (IAU) and the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) undertook separate research in order to understand the impact of COVID-19 in the communities they directly support.

The first IAU Global Survey on the Impact of COVID-19 was developed by IAU for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) around the globe. This survey was available online from the 25th of March to the 17th of April of 2020. It collected 424 answers, of which 194 were from Europe. The most common positions of respondents in Europe were head of international office (19%), Head and deputy head of institution (both at 16%) and Faculty member (15%). These categories of respondents provided different perspectives from the HEIs sector, however not necessarily the institutional perspective.

The survey about the Impact of COVID-19 on Student Exchange in Europe was developed by ESN for students in exchange programmes. This survey was available from the 19th of March to the 30th of March of 2020. The survey received 21 930 answers, of which 76% were on Erasmus+ Student Mobility, 10.7% on Erasmus+ Traineeships and 6.8% on Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility.

In this paper, IAU and ESN are providing a joint reflection on the impact of COVID-19 in student exchange, by creating a parallel between the answers from HEIs and the answers provided by the students. Through this reflection, the entities compare two different but complementary perspectives. When going through the paper, it is crucial to acknowledge the different methodologies applied for the two studies, as explained above. One important difference to underline is that the results of the IAU survey are expressed in percentage of HEIs, while the results of the ESN survey are expressed in percentage of students. While it is true that the two percentages are related, they do not have the same weight (e.g. 50% of European HEIs do not necessarily represent 50% of European students doing student exchange).

IMPACT ON STUDENT EXCHANGE

Regarding the **impact on student exchange**, when comparing the data collected by both organisations, both perspectives generally meet. When asked about the impact of COVID-19 on international mobility, 53% of the HEIs answered that international students were grounded at their institutions and 43% of their students were grounded at foreign institutions. Regarding the data collected by ESN, when students were asked about their location, 42% of the students indicated they were grounded in their hosting country.

Concerning cancelled mobilities, 30% of HEIs answered that all their mobilities were cancelled and 47% of HEIs answered that student exchanges were cancelled with some countries, while 25% of

students claimed that their mobilities were cancelled. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the possible impact of the two different time windows of each survey, especially for what concerns mobilities cancelled. The IAU survey could reflect a higher number of mobilities cancelled, as it covers half of the month of April.

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HEIS AND STUDENTS

Communication between HEIs and students was as well under analysis in both studies, however the ESN survey provides for more detailed information. In fact, the IAU survey asked only if HEIs have the right infrastructure in place in order to communicate with students and 97% of the HEIs representatives shared that they did. However, the fact of having the right infrastructure does not tell anything on the effectiveness of the communication. The ESN survey provides for more information on this topic, as it analyses the students' views on the availability of information regarding health measures (78% answered positively); the availability of information in English (74% answered positively); and regarding the availability of information about traveling restrictions (only 65% of students answered that there was enough information). These results mean that there is indeed an effort by HEIs to communicate with their students, and that in the majority of cases, the flow of information is good. However, there is a non negligible percentage of HEIs where this effort is not efficient. At these HEIs there is a need to review how information is delivered, both in terms of content, language and technical platforms used.

SHIFT TO ONLINE LEARNING

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the need to adapt teaching methodologies, due to the impossibility of having presential classes. Therefore, **online teaching and learning** has played an important role in Higher Education for the last months. When questioned about teaching and learning, 85% of the HEI representatives and 85% of the international students who answered to the surveys shared that presential classes had been replaced by online methodologies, totally or partially. Additionally, 12% of the responding HEIs which suspended their classes completely, were developing solutions for teaching and learning, such as through online methodologies and self-study means. This leads to the conclusion that despite the difficulties in the adaptation to a completely different methodology for teaching, the Higher Education sector demonstrated reactivity in order to find solutions to the challenge raised by the pandemic, and of continuing teaching and learning. It remains to be seen how the quality of learning is affected by the shift from face-to-face to online teaching, especially when the situation will change from a crisis management one to a new normal for the new academic year. It will be important to study this change more in detail, both from HEIs and student perspectives.

STUDENT SUPPORT

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic showed the need to **support students** with a more holistic approach, not only at the academic level. 42% of HEI representatives stated that both their HEIs and partner institutions abroad had contingency plans put in place, 34% had contingency plans at their own universities and 23% had no contingency plans, neither in their institutions nor in their partner institutions abroad. In the survey developed by ESN, only 58% students identified their host university when asked who supported them during the pandemic and only 44,6% identified their home university.

Despite the majority of HEIs having answered positively to the support provided to students, the

lack of contingency plans at almost one quarter of HEIs can lead to a negative impact in the students experience. It is very important that HEIs do not let students feel abandoned, lacking support by the institutions.

FINAL REMARKS

The major conclusion of the comparison between the results of the ESN and IAU surveys, despite the differences in methodology and time frame, is that the perception of HEIs and students on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on different aspects of higher education coincides.

This is a positive signal, as it shows that both institutions and students have the same understanding of the disruption caused by the pandemic and this could facilitate developing the appropriate solutions.

The second major conclusion is that the higher education community as a whole reacted promptly to the disruption caused by COVID-19 and that the emergency solutions adopted were considered as successful in the majority of cases.

However, as a consequence of the outbreak, students faced many challenges in their daily lives, besides the ones stated previously. Students in these times faced mental health issues, such as the feeling of anxiety and isolation. Measures must be taken in order to prevent situations like these and provide students with the due support. Additionally, students identified that they were victims of racism. Racism is unjustifiable and unacceptable. Knowing that students weren't safe even in an environment which is supposed to be welcoming and tolerant should be part of a reflection in order to take measures not only to mitigate these situations, but to completely erase them. IAU and ESN will work together in order to foster safety and inclusion in our communities.

The higher education community should now move from a crisis management situation to more long term planning for the new academic year. Many of the solutions implemented during the crisis demonstrated their usefulness and will probably continue, but in order to continue offering quality education in the new academic year, careful planning should be done, as new challenges emerge. For instance, the reopening of campuses will pose questions relating to finding the right balance between face-to-face and online learning, between physical mobility and "virtual exchange". There will be a need to provide a safe environment on campus for all students (including international students), which will demand more efforts by both HEIs and students. International mobility will be more complicated and international students will need more and probably different support by HEIs.

Therefore, more than ever, it is necessary that HEIs and students collaborate closely in finding solutions to provide the current and next generation of students the same, if not better, learning opportunities than pre COVID-19 generations of students had.