

Kosovo Erasmus+ Office

Higher education Reform Experts (HERE) Round table report

Lessons learned from the impact of Covid-19 in the Higher Education in Kosovo

15 October 2021, Prishtina, Kosovo

Lessons learned from the impact of Covid-19 in the Higher Education in Kosovo

Authors: Bardha Qirezi and Bekim Baliqi (HERE Kosovo)

Introduction

With the global outbreak of the Covid-19 virus, at the beginning of the year 2020, most of the Universities across the world were forced to close down and to find alternatives to organise distance learning. According to the International Association of Universities (2020), more than 1.5 billion students around the world have been affected by these measures. Similarly, most of the scientific organizations and research projects worldwide have been affected by Covid 19 restrictions and other emergency actions. Regardless of implications and challenges, response and adjustments to the new circumstances have been considered effective and have accelerated the need for reforms and digital transformation in higher education. The lessons learned from the experience of HEI in Kosovo, discussed in this report, will serve for policy recommendations and as a basis for further research.

The Round Table Format

On 15 October 2021, marking the Erasmus Days in Kosovo, The Erasmus Office in Kosovo, convened a roundtable discussion in Swiss Hotel, to explore the impact of Covid 19 in Higher Education Institutions in Kosovo.

The roundtable was moderated by Jehona Lushaku, the Erasmus + Office coordinator. The discussion was led by two key note remarks from Bardha Qirezi and Bekim Baliqi and followed by contributions of invited teaching staff in HEI in Kosovo.

List of Participants/contributors:

Resilience of HEI and the need for strategic shifts in planning and management. Impact of Covid 19 in HEI in Kosovo and lessons learned:
Bardha Qirezi

To set the stage, Ms. Qirezi outlined available data on impact of Covid in HEI and main lessons learned from HEI regarding emergency response and crisis management, HEI operations and associated government support and teaching and learning.

Emergency Response and Crisis Management

Although there is no national study on impact of Covid 19 in HEI in Kosovo, observations from Ministry of Education and Science and HEI reports reveal that although there was a lack of contingency and emergency planning at the government and institutional level, The response of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) was immediate accelerating the initiatives in digitalization processes and moving face to face instruction into online instruction. The main challenges HEI faced were lack of prior distance learning solutions available in the institutions, difficulties to implement social distancing measures when physical presence was allowed (Kallxo, 2021) and the use of digital tools for administrative purposes. While the government guidelines still prioritise safe returning, instructing to organise physical classes only when social distance measures allow it for lectures with priority given to tutorials, exams, and lab work, HEI organised limited awareness campaigns for their members for safe return and vaccination and limited contingency plans for full return and adaptations to new measures.

Impact on University Operations and Government Support

There is lack of data regarding the impact of Covid 19 on HEI operations including student enrolment, student dropout, university finances, and university services among others. Only two measures taken by Government of Kosovo are identified as applicable to private HEI as public universities budget although affected by the cuts, was largely secured by public funding. The private higher education institutions may have been affected due to disturbances in student fees collection and inability to pay staff, rent or other services. In response to moving classes online, HEI needed to invest in internet speed and coverage, learning management systems and other digitalisation features. We have no information on emergency funds disbursed to public HEI institutions earmarked as Covid 19 support, although, there are reports that public HEI institutions invested in internet access and coverage, devices, licenses and other technological

aspects required for the organisation of distance education. We have no data from the universities on the Covid 19 pandemic on staff remuneration, layoffs or redundancies, but only data on businesses who benefitted from the measure from the Ministry of Finances to subsidise salaries. There are few reports on the decrease of salaries in the private HEI institutions from 30-50% for the three months closure in 2020 with stabilisation throughout the academic year 2020/2021. There are also reports that HEI benefitted from the government subsidy to pay half of the rent in the first wave of pandemics. There is also no data available for the impact on student enrolments or HEI incomes as well as changes on student registration profiles as indirect impact on family incomes.

In terms of university operations, while online meetings became a norm with significant impact on the number of academic bodies meetings resulting in limited staff cooperation and coordination. There is also no data on impact of student services such counselling and library services, recognising that most of the library resources at the HEI are offered physically or with access to online resources on campus. The main impact can be explained as building HEI resilience and awareness for the need for technological improvements and digitalisation, prioritising digital transformation in HEI strategic planning within institutions and within government. From this experience, the lesson learned is the importance of resilience in times of disruptions as well as the need for coordinated efforts at government and institutional level not only to respond to crisis but also to plan for the future.

Impact on Learning, Teaching, research and international cooperation

The Covid 19 pandemics accelerated the use of platforms to provide what is called by the literature as emergency remote teaching. The remote learning modalities used by HEI in Kosovo, did not change the system, mode of delivery and pedagogy but only the medium of delivery. HEI in Kosovo used Web 2.0 platforms which were either migrated in their learning platforms or were used through registering their users. Both methods provide the tools for synchronous live lectures which were mainly delivered through Google meet, Microsoft 360 (teams), Zoom, Big Blue Botton and Webex. This necessitated the hybrid model, where physical presence was needed for exercises, practical work, lab work and examinations.

When analysing the challenges, it is evident that the quality of provision depended on the quality of internet access and infrastructure at HEI and at students` and teachers` homes, technological support, access to equipment, intrusions in the family space, digital competences among students and teachers and assessment methodologies and technologies. While HEI compared to Pre University had access to internet and infrastructure, some HEI had to invest in internet speed, servers, equipment and acquiring new licences to respond to pandemics. The need to improve IT support for teachers and students was also reported as main need, as understaffed IT

departments carried the heavy burden to implement technological adjustments and provide support to students and staff. In addition, limited training was offered to staff regarding pedagogical and assessment approaches in online formats. The main obstacle reported by teachers were the intrusions they and students had during lectures in their family space. There were also reported difficulties to remote and hybrid learning in some disciplines such as natural sciences, engineering and medicine. Therefore, a lesson learned from this is that digitalisation processes require the advancement of digital competences in the academic community and that HEI should adjust their strategic plans and attitudes to make this shift.

There is no data on Covid 19 impact on research and international cooperation activities. While there are reports of dramatic decrease in research activities and international cooperation, especially in student and staff mobility. There is also no data on HEI engagements in Covid 19 research and other community activities undertaken. The mere situation of the lack of data represents a necessity for researchers and institutions to undertake further research in this topic. Moreover, any new reforms, investments and digital transformation process need to rely on evidence not only of the impact of Covid 19 in HEI, but also on the needs for strategic changes in the future.

New Normality and the path to HE reforms-Impact of Covid 19 in HEI in Kosovo and lessons learned: Bekim Baliqi

Mr. Baliqi focused on the impact of Covid 19 in the new normality highlighting the risks of improvised and ineffective strategies and the need for change in HE.

From enforced transition to new normality

The effective incentives and creative engagements in the Higher Education Institutions in Kosovo as a response to closure have been undertaken immediately more than in any other sector. However, this kind of “state of emergency” at the Universities after almost two years has started to turn into an improvised routine and ineffective strategy. It remains unclear how this period of virtual and distance learning will affect the academia and research sector in the long term. But one is for sure, the academic world, and with it, the universities will not be the same as before. As in many other areas, technology was not only a helpful and facilitating tool but also the only available option. From online learning, e-administration, videoconferencing and distance research collaboration, the academia and research community have adapted quickly to the new

circumstances, which implies the enforced transition from the state of emergency to a new normality.

Impact of changes in HE sector

All these changes have a profound impact on the very mission of the research, study and Higher education in general.

- First of all, the economic crisis will increase the pressure even more on the Universities and research projects to reduce further the budget, staff and other necessary funds affecting their quality, innovation and productivity.
- Then the Universities in terms of internationalization, including student and staff exchanges and mobility, international partnerships, research and projects will need more funds and engagement to increase the lost networks, projects and partnerships and research funds during the pandemic. This reflected on even greater isolation of the Kosovo higher education system but affected also the quality of education and research.
- Distance learning has influenced also socialization and institutional relationships, between students and academic staff and between the scientific community and funding partners. As a result, it decreased needed networks and familiarization with the institution where students are studying, as well as it will affect the overall evaluation, engagement and ambition for further study and research intention.
- The decrease of the number of the applications for the study in many departments at the Philosophic Faculty, and I believe in many other faculties as well, is a clear indication that students have lost their interest or motivation to study and that the decreasing trend of the students could be more alarming in the coming years.
- On the other hand, the academic staff itself has faced difficulties with an assessment of learning and student achievements, but also there was a lack of cooperation, communication and collective commitment. In other words, the social and physical distance has gradually produced an institutional, collegial and communicative distance of the academic staff and students.

The opportunity for transformational changes in HE

Certainly, these experiences and conditions can also serve as a unique opportunity for creative and innovative changes in higher education and research area. The pandemic revealed several serious shortcomings in both the public health and education systems but also opened up countless opportunities for their changes and improvements. A precondition for these improvements is the real commitment of the decision-makers and sufficient economic, legislative and governmental support to the experts of those policy fields and needed reforms.

Whether we will remain in a state of emergency indefinitely or adapt to the digital epoch, certainly remains to be seen. But the fact that the future requires modifications and transformations both in the implementation of digitalization and in the application of new modalities is practically undeniable. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many new modes of learning and teaching, new tools and trends have emerged and the same may continue as we are going toward a new digital era of education and science.

As the COVID-19 pandemic comes to an end, we will enter a new era, from which nothing will remain the same. States, societies and consequently universities which are unable to adapt to developments and new trends will lose the reason for their existence. More than fear or exaggeration, this should be understood as an appeal for necessary transformation. Although there is no better beginning of such a transformation than starting from academia. This is why it is necessary for the academic world, and especially for the University's leadership, to begin with actions in this direction.

Discussion

The key note addresses were followed by an open discussion where managers and teaching staff at HEI institutions in Kosovo highlighted the main challenges that the Universities faced during the pandemic, trying to find out how to overcome these challenges in a post-pandemic period and use these as chances for the transformation of the HEI.

Social distancing in the academic and wider community

Dean of the Philosophic Faculty Prof. Berxulli, also HERE, discussed about a need to have a student's service that offer consultation regarding psychological, emotional and carrier issues during the pandemic at all Faculties. He stressed also a necessity to establish such a service also for the academic and university staff permanently. University spaces do not offer student and staff services, social and cultural spaces such as cafeteria, culture events. The organisational culture needs to change from a transactional approach to developmental approach.

In line with this discussion, the Vice-rector of the University of Mitrovica, Ms. Merita Shala, highlighted the need for university research focusing on staff and student wellbeing found concerning prevalence of depression and anxiety among students. In this regard, universities should be closer to their community in times of such crisis. She also stressed a need of the Universities to be more open for the broader community and cooperate with civil society sector also in the post-pandemic period.

Similarly, prof. Lulzim Mjeku emphasised that University cannot be separated from the society, and that the pandemics has affected personal lives of students, professors and administrative staff with consequences transferred in organisational setting. The faculty was involved with the association of Francophony in topics related to Covid 19, however, there was limited engagement to implement such initiatives at satisfactory level at the Faculty. What became clear during the pandemics was that performance of universities was not satisfactory in normal situations, and the pandemic only emphasised the need for HEI to redefine its role and undertake serious reforms.

HEI infrastructure adapting to pandemic and post pandemic situation

The lack of appropriate infrastructure and experience with distance learning had a direct impact on learning and teaching. Ms. Shala emphasised that before the pandemic, ideas to organise few online courses were resisted by the faculty. Absence of equipment, and other virtual labs and technologies affected many subjects that were postponed.

Regarding infrastructure, a young scholar from the Faculty of Economy, maintained that Covid 19 found them totally unprepared with very low level of digitalisation. He criticised a technological and infrastructural capacities at the University of Prishtina as a failure to respond and adopt properly during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic situation. According to him, the presence of students in online lectures was bigger than in physical settings with many of them preferring to continue online due to other factors. He also added a need to design better strategies and conduct research from the academic staff that would contribute to understand student needs and react better to those challenges in the future. Similarly, Mr. Alban Elshani highlighted that faculty requests to improve infrastructure, such as buying computers, laptops, wireless were not implemented to date and are still impacting the delivery. According to X,X, Vice rector at University of Mitrovica, that has a modern infrastructure, budget cuts in education affected by Covid 19 emergency, affected their university maintenance services struggling to pay cleaning and other subcontracted services until funds were secured.

Prof. Lule Ahmedi, from the technical Faculty of the University of Prishtina, argued that the computers, digital platforms and other online tools are not only instruments but should be used as a means to improve interactive learning, evaluation and quality of higher education in terms that they could be combine as a hybrid form of lectures and assessment of the students in the future. While at her faculty, majority of staff were familiarised with the tools, she expressed general concerns of quality of delivery. She also emphasised that digital tools in administration were not fully used, especially in the field of quality assurance, where online questionnaires could

be more effectively used. There are also concerns on the legal implications and management preparedness to implement digital transformations at HEI including online learning.

Teaching and learning during the pandemics

MS. Krenare Pireva, professor at UBT College and member of National Quality Council, suggested digital transformation not only at HEI but also at MEST, AKA and other relevant institutions, in order to improve cooperation, integration and networking in the Higher Education sector. She explained that there are incentives in this regard and that this chance to transform HEI should be supported by all stakeholders. She mentioned a joint research project that analysed infrastructure, legal implication, and teaching and learning from the perspective of students and teachers, which confirms the rise of passive student participation in online settings. A sample of 300 students in their study revealed that teaching resembled a monologue with limited interaction and decrease in student results in examination.

Teaching and Learning was particularly difficult in certain faculties. According to Prof. Zake Prelvukaj, from the Faculty of Arts, teaching in arts requires personal approach and physical contact with teachers. As it is, Faculty of Arts has very bad conditions, and moving online could be applied in some technologies in graphics and digital painting, but could not replace classical approaches. Students even struggled to buy the necessary tools needed for their projects and only 30% of individual projects were implemented. There were many shortfalls in student learning outcomes in this respect.

According to Ms. Albana Veseli, Natural Sciences were also very affected because 60% of contact hours is implemented in labs. There was significant decrease of student cooperation research projects. While access to online learning resources was considered as a benefit, Prof. Vjosa Hamiti emphasised that students do not have access to online libraries as their access is limited only in university premises. It is an emergent need of Universities to secure appropriate access to digital libraries. Internships were particularly affected. Ms. Almera from XXX, explained how they were pushed to change the practical programme and student and staff development training to respond to emergent needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- University administration, student services and governance of the HEI should be increasingly offered in electronic format.
- Legal frameworks, strategies, funds and policies that enable the desired transformation of the HE in the post-pandemic period should be adopted
- Student Management Information Systems should be further advanced and expanded in their usage.
- Continual training and capacity building programmes of the academic staff on education and research digital competence should be offered
- Institutional cooperation between HEI and MEST can be improved through digital platforms
- Learning, student assessment and interactive communication should be offered in some areas in online and in hybrid form.
- Learning material and literature for students should be offered progressively in electronic version and as open source.
- Research generated in universities, local and international research project should be regularly published and made available to all through national database/library services.
- Further research focused on higher education should be promoted.

References

International Association of Universities, 2020. *The impact of COVID 19 on higher education around the world: IAU Global Survey Report*, Paris: International Association of Universities (IAU).

UNESCO, 2021. *COVID-19: reopening and reimagining universities, survey on higher education through the UNESCO National Commissions*, Paris: UNESCO.