COVID-19 Higher Education Challenges and Responses Kosovo Case

- Report template

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Abstract

COVID-19 has had an impact on all aspects of life. Preventive measures towards the spread of COVID-19 have had an impact on higher education around the world, and owing to social isolation, higher education institutions all over the world have had to transition from a traditional format to an online format (Garca-Morales, Moreno, & Rojas, 2021).

The purpose of this study is to examine the various consequences of COVID-19 on HEIs in Kosovo in short, medium, and long-term scenarios, as well as to present and debate the immediate impact and actions done on the Higher Education sector's engagement. The report includes an overview of the new strategic papers in place in response to the situation in Kosovo, as well as the consequences on teaching and learning, research, and overall main problems, opportunities, and developments.

1. Introduction and approach

Kosovo has been experiencing a high degree of uncertainty in various dimensions such as health, education, finances, and so on, as a result of the global impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. With the outbreak of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) in early 2020, the government introduced its virus preparedness and response plan and subsequent action plan. Higher Education

Institutions (HEIs) across the place had to close their doors and find alternative methods of education, such as, online teaching and using various tools and digital platforms for learning. Despite the pandemic's extensive consequences, impacts, and challenges, as well as the resulting restrictive measures in practically in every public sector and sphere of our daily lives, the response and adjustments to the new normal have been comprehensive and remarkably effective.

This paper aims to analyse the various impacts of COVID-19 on HEIs in Kosovo, in the short-, medium- and long-term scenarios and to present and discuss the immediate impact and action taken overall on the Higher Education sector engagement. The analysis provides an overview into the new strategic documents in place which respond to the situation in Kosovo, effects on teaching and learning, impact on research and overall key challenges and potential opportunities and changes. General Assessment of the COVID-19 impact on Higher Education is mainly done through two questionnaires addressed to the actors who are directly involved in HEI's activities – students and administrative and academic staff.

2. New strategic documents in response to epidemic situation in Kosovo and comparison with the global issue

COVID-19 has affected life in all spheres. Preventive measures against the spread of COVID-19 have affected the functioning of higher education globally and due to social isolation, higher education institutions around the world had to shift the traditional way to online format (García-Morales, Moreno, & Rojas, 2021).

Kosovo has been experiencing a lot of changes and difficulties ever since the COVID-19 started. Some of the most affected sectors are health care, education, the economy and so forth. On the 12th of March 2020 the Government of the Republic of Kosovo (RKS) as a result of the spread of COVID-19, closed all schools (Beqiri & Kabashi, 2020). The measures that were undertaken by the Government of Kosovo have affected the functioning of higher education in Kosovo.

Just like other countries around the world, Kosovo tried to take immediate action regarding online education. The Ministry of Education with difficulty started organizing online classes through video recordings which it broadcast on public television RTK. For university level online teaching was predicted as well through different e-learning platforms was organized and sponsored by the government (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020).

The European Commission during the pandemic time has created "The Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)" which has a vision for high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe (European Commission, 2021). The action plan is a call to action to:

- learn from the COVID-19 crisis, during which technology is being used at an unprecedented scale in education and training
- make education and training systems fit for the digital age

This action plan has two priorities which are:

1. Fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem

2. Enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation

Kosovo in comparison with the EU, had no experience with online teaching for higher education and for the University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina" the largest public university in Kosovo, the transfer of teaching in the online format was done for the first time (Duraku & Hoxha, 2020).

To address the threats posed by the pandemic and manage the outbreak of COVID-19, the Government of the Republic of Kosovo has planned action in three main sectors: Health, Economy and Education (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020). The key points for education are:

- Online education platform a (Creating an online learning platform from Government of the Republic of Kosovo for students who are unable to attend classes in classes due to time constraints of caused public emergency situation from the COVID-19 pandemic)

- Internet and computer access a (Connect with internet service providers to provide free internet access for all students in order to give them all access to online distance learning activities), (Connect with firms to equip students with computers and enable them to engage in online distance learning activities)

- Re-opening schools and universities 2020-2021 à (Establishment of a task force with representatives from the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Public Health, to draft a plan to safely reopen schools for the 2020-21 academic year)

Some of the main documents that Kosovo has on higher education are:

- KOSOVO EDUCATION STRATEGIC PLAN 2017-2021

- NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY 2016 – 2021 (NDS)

- Programme Priorities of the Government of the Republic of Kosovo 2021-2025

- QUALITY ASSURANCE STRATEGY FOR KOSOVO PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION 2016-2020

In December 2020/January 2021 the prime minister announced that online classes will continue and dormitories will remain open. Exams and practical laboratory work may be held in person but must respect national health guidelines (OECD, 2021).

The effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the country's economy were immediately visible. However, Kosovo gave 76,605,420 euros for the economic recovery program from which 3,232,000 euros were divided for students in order not to pay for the summer semester fee (GAP Institute, 2021).

International Business College Mitrovica (IBC-M) has been in continuous contact with the public officials regarding COVID-19. IBC-M created a "Teaching Contingency Planning on COVID-19 situation" which is a list of possible scenarios that have been identified as options and that were following the mandatory requirements by the Kosovo Government. Some of the scenarios included:

S1. Return to campuses and the normal working environment

S2. Online only

S3. Online classes with tests and exams place on campus in small groups

3. General Assessment of COVID-19 Impact in Higher Education in Kosovo

The higher educational system in Kosovo took a hit from the massive wave of COVID-19 starting from March of 2020 up to now. Faced with the alarming situation, the government presented new lockdown measure at the beginning of March, where all institutions and businesses were closed. In that disarray, the higher education institutions started operating in online mediums, so all the lectures, workshops, seminars, meetings and examinations were organized through various online platforms. However, with the start of the new academic year 2020/21, the measures were eased a bit, and some HEI started to operate on-sight in smaller groups of people while respecting the hygienic measures. Currently, depending on the institutions and their regulations, the HEIs work with a hybrid system, with exams and minor events held on-sight, and others such as lectures, meetings and bigger events held online.

To assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the regulations implemented to control its spread through HEIs, we constructed two questionnaires for the actors who are directly involved in HEIs activities – students and professors. The surveys' format was open-ended, multiple choices questions with a majority of Likert scale and Matrix questions, to understand the respondents' opinions and feelings on the topic. The surveys were distributed through official university channels like student unions and administrative staff, and online platforms like Facebook, Instagram and others. The questionnaires targeted only Kosovo's HEIs and it were translated in three languages (English, Albanian and Serbian).

The students' questionnaire assembled a sample number of 10,000 students from all the regions of Kosovo, whereas the professors' questionnaire gathered some 500 professors.

Student questionnaire: The first questions extracted basic information such as institution, year of study and equipment used to access online lectures, and moved on to more complex and in-depth questions such as the main obstacles and challenges as well as satisfaction levels concerning the dynamic of online learning and the impact on the pandemic on different life spheres.

*Professor questionnaire:*

Institutions and year of study

The majority of the students (64%) study in the University "Hasan Prishtina" in Prishtine, followed by the University "Haxhi Zeka" in Peja (18%), the University "Ukshin Hoti" in Prizren (12%) and others, mainly private, universities (6%). Most of the students were 1st and 3rd year students with

an accumulated percentage of 78%, whereas others were 2nd years and very few were 4th or 5th year students.

How would you rate the overall response of your university/college in regards to the situation with COVID-19?

With reference to the data, it was indicated that students were either satisfied or unsatisfied with the overall response of their university/college regarding the pandemic situation. There would be no significant difference if the HEIs had a more complex or quicker response time on the sweeping pandemic. The students who answered with 'Difficult' elaborated that some professors were hard to adjust to online learning; there were many technical problems, the quality of teaching was not the same, and the practical student work could not be offered online. On the other hand, the students responding with 'Easy' pointed out that universities were already well adapted or adapted fast with online learning.
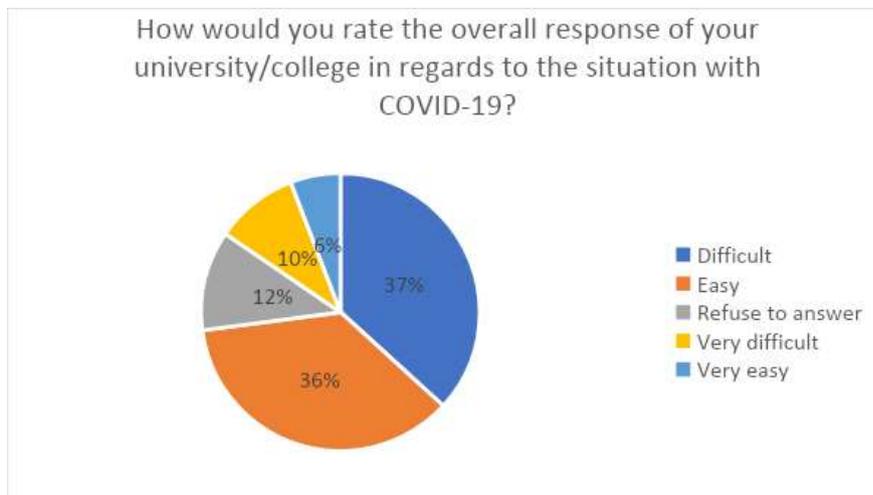
On a scale from 1 to 5, how would you evaluate your previous experience (before the epidemic) in distance learning?

With '1' being the lowest and '5' being the highest, most respondents chose '3' as the neutral answer because most were not involved in distance learning before the pandemic.

What equipment/devices do you use for the purpose of distance learning?

Among the four categories (mobile phone, laptop, PC and all of the above), most students (68%) answered that they use laptops for distance learning.

What do you think are the biggest obstacles students encounter in distance learning activities?

When asked about the most significant obstacles students encounter in distance learning activities, 3/5 of the students ranked the answers in a similar order. It can be noticed that all the obstacles are seen as important among them. Weak internet connection, lack or limited availability of hardware

devices that had to be shared with other family members, poor home/learning environment and getting used to unfamiliar environments/applications was the most prevalent ranking.

What has been the biggest challenge in moving to an all-online setting for your classes?

Overall, students claimed that adapting to the online environment, especially with the practical work either being ignored or organized online, lack of concentration and self-discipline, weak internet connectivity, lack of physical contact with classmates or group mates and the professors' inconsistency were the main challenges of an all-online learning setting. However, a minority of students also claimed that they had no problems whatsoever adapting to the new learning conditions.

How would you rate the TECHNOLOGIES (VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS) made available by the UNIVERSITY were suitable for meeting the needs of online educational processes in which you took part?

The respondents expressed that the technologies (virtual environments) offered by their universities for learning purposes were mainly good, as shown in graph 2 below. Together with the previous answers, we can highlight that students, even with all the obstacles and challenges they faced, are moderately satisfied with the virtual environment conditions.
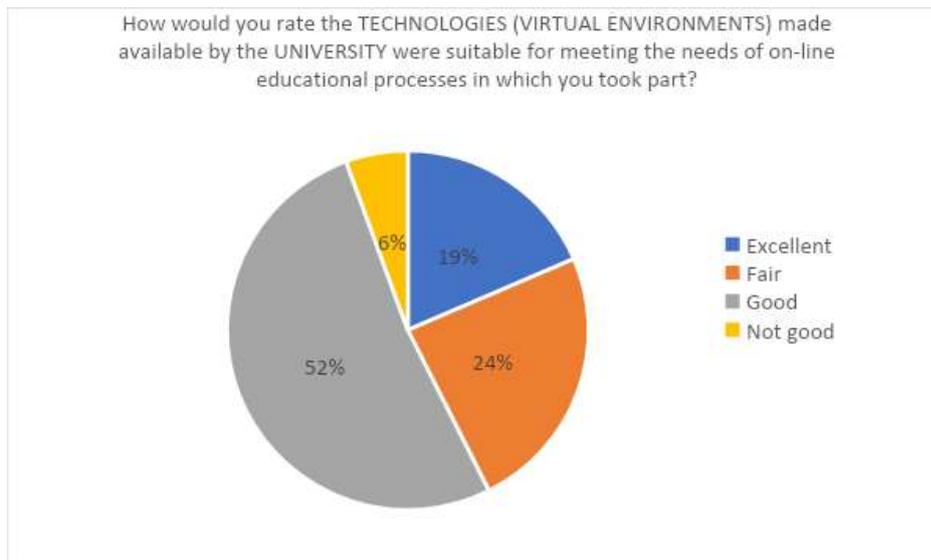
How long did it take for you to get used to distance learning?

The young generations are live in a technology dominated world and are very skilled in using many technological devices. Thus around 45% got used to distance learning within a week or two, but also a large number of respondents (37%) got used to distance learning in less than a week. The share of students who had a hard time or took longer (4 to 5 weeks) was the same (7%).

COALITION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE (CHEQA) PROJECT

From the TECHNOLOGICAL perspective, how would you rate your university/college TEACHERS' ability to move their educational activities online?

38% of the respondents were very satisfied with the adaptability of the universities in online activities, whereas 37% were moderately satisfied. 11% were highly satisfied, 10% were not very satisfied, and 4% were unsatisfied.

How would you rate the dynamics of an online learning?

The majority of the students answered with 'Good' when asked how they would rate online learning dynamics. There was a slight difference of 1.2% between the students who answered 'Fair' and 'Not good'. Generally, the students find the dynamics of online learning adapted by Kosovo's HEIs good.

How do you feel the college has responded to this sudden change?

The responses vary on this question. One could classify them into three groups: satisfied with the universities' responses, moderately satisfied and disappointed. Students of the first category stated that the college responded quite well to the unexpected changes brought by COVID-19 because they responded fast and correctly. Respondents of the second group are neutral about the situation. They are satisfied but think the HEIs could be more responsible, and some aspects of the pandemic were out of their control. The last group is unsatisfied with the response of the universities because they showed bad management practices.

How would you rate the effect of COVID-19 on your overall psychological well-being?

Students' psychological well-being was affected quite severely by the COVID-19 pandemic. With a reference from the graph, the students had difficulty coping with the challenges the pandemic brought up. The second largest group brought some minor discomforts, followed up by the group on which it had strong effects, and the last and most underrepresented in which it had no effect whatsoever.

How would you rate the effect of COVID-19 on your overall psychological well-being?
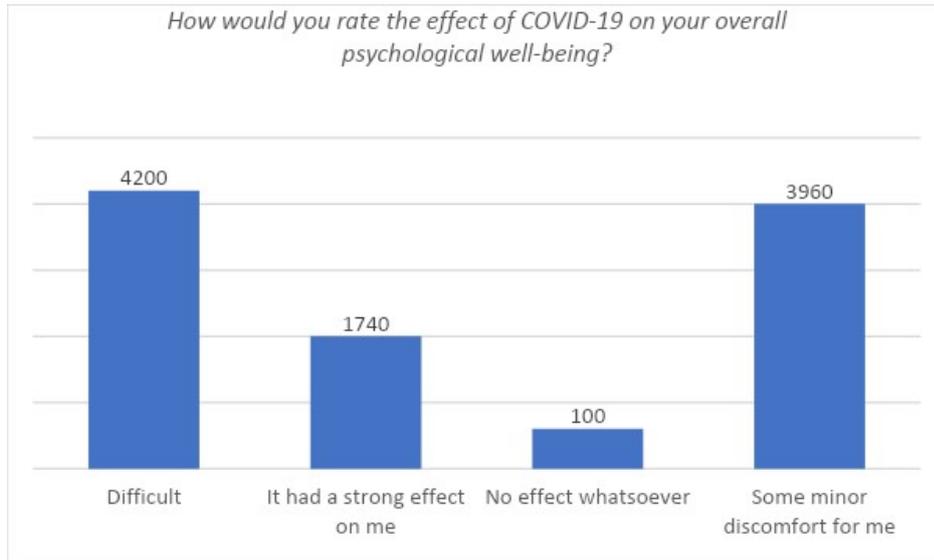
How did the pandemic affect your mobility status, and how did your university react to the potential changes in the process?

Regarding this question, the students seem to have misunderstood the phrasing of the question because 'mobility' referred to the student mobilities offered by the universities and their partners, such as the Erasmus+ programme, not 'mobility' in terms of the freedom of movement. Thus, this question does not exercise any helpful information in terms of student mobility.

In what way did COVID-19 change the following aspects of your life?

Living situation

The vast majority of the respondents claimed that things were slightly different, and they wished that their living situation would soon enough turn into normality.

Access to food

Access to food was unchanged because all the supermarket supply chains worked with the same working schedule even during the pandemic.

Physical and mental health

The respondents answered that the physical and mental health realm has changed, and they do not feel comfortable with the state they are currently in. They hope that the situation will soon turn into normality.

Education

In the education category, the situation has changed according to the respondents. They have started to become seriously concerned and wish that things will soon turn back to 'normality. However, a large group of students also responded that the COVID-19 did not affect the category.

Income

Lastly, the incomes of the majority of the respondents have either not changed or only slightly changed. Although it started to become a pressing matter for a group of students, and they are seriously concerned about their income status.

4. Effect on teaching and learning

A shift in the overall perception of education was nonetheless evident during the pandemic in Kosovo. It has made many HEIs reconsider their approach to education, its ultimate purpose, and goals, emphasizing support to networking, students' digital independence, and access to virtual education tools.
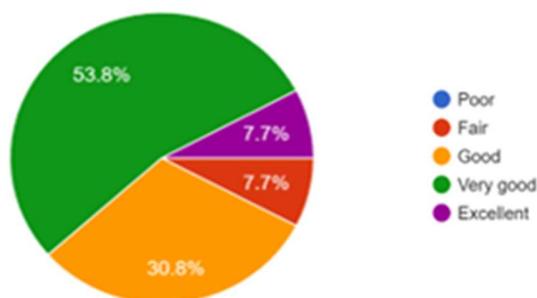
Even though formal education has a tendency for slow changes, requiring a gradual build-up of strategic planning and careful consideration of students/educators' preferences and needs, the unexpected situation with the pandemic in Kosovo and a rapid shift from in-person to a virtual environment made HEIs come up with new educational approaches, especially in studies that require experiential involvement of students or learning-by-doing system (health, agricultural, educational studies, etc.)

After the decision of the Kosovo government to introduce lockdown and limit in-person activities at educational institutions, trying to minimize the spread of COVID-19, the majority of HEIs enhanced their teaching and learning capacities by introducing assistive technologies in the form of hardware (digital devices) and software (applications).

Lack of access to assistive technology left out a certain percentage of poor economic background students outside the learning process, bringing to light socio-economic issues such as inclusion and equality; Kosovo Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MEST) and numerous international organizations and local businesses provided digital tools for those unable to partake in online learning activities. These efforts yielded solid results, where 96% of all children in Kosovo were able to participate in distance learning activities during the lockdown effectively.

Distance-learning education was supported, and assistive technology devices were at the disposal of most research participants (HEI staff, professors, and students), where 7.7% of participants consider it excellent, 53.8% are very satisfied, and 30.8% indicate good satisfaction with how their HEI adapted to the virtual environment.

How would you rate the TECHNOLOGIES (VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS) made available by the UNIVERSITY were suitable for meeting the needs of on-line educational processes in which you took part?

Distance-learning education was supported, and assistive technology devices were at the disposal of most research participants (HEI staff, professors and students), where 7.7% of participants consider it excellent, 53.8% of them are very satisfied, and 30.8% indicating good satisfaction with how their HEI adapted to virtual environment.

A significant number of participants expressed their ability to adapt to new circumstances (61.5%) rapidly and said that it took them less than a week to move to online learning.

How long did it take for you to get used to distance learning?
13 responses

- Less than a week
- Within one to two weeks
- Within three to four weeks
- I still can't get used to distance learning
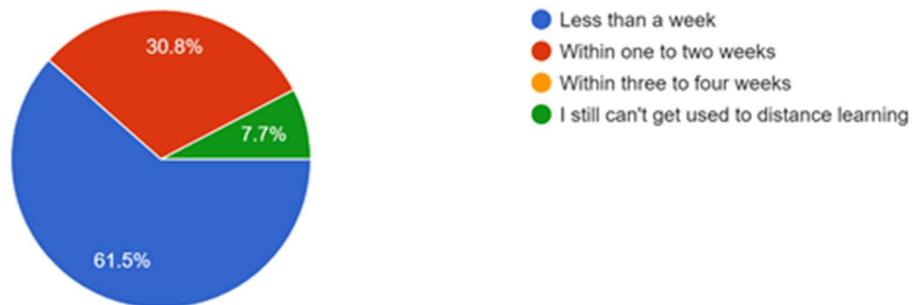
Also, the respondents rated highly their lecturer's ability to switch to distance learning, with 69.2% of them being very satisfied and 7.7% being slightly satisfied with the process.

From the TECHNOLOGICAL point of view, how would you rate your university/college TEACHERS' ability to move their educational activities online?
13 responses

- Not at all satisfied
- Slightly satisfied
- Moderately satisfied
- Very satisfied
- Extremely satisfied
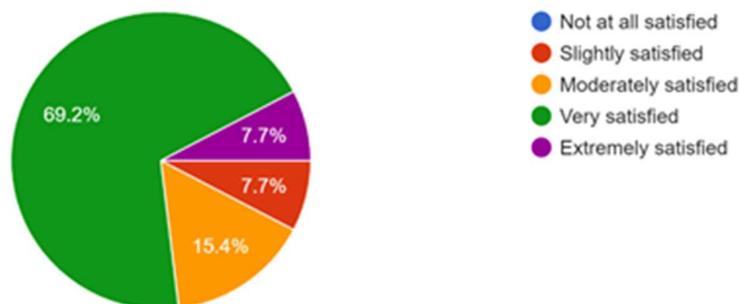
The pandemic didn't catch off guard HEIs in Kosovo, with 67.7% respondents being positive (50% strongly agree and 16.7% agree). Their institutions already had the infrastructure in place, allowing them to switch promptly from in-person to virtual environments.

When the outbreak started, my HE Institution had the infrastructure in place that allowed us to switch and adapt promptly from in-person to virtual (online) environment?

12 responses
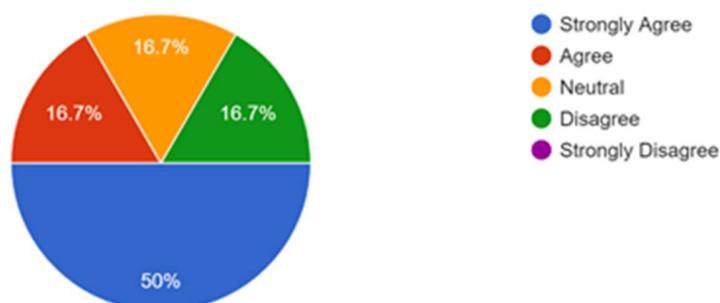
Such a result indicated that most respondents of those who responded positively (50% + 16.7% = 66.7%) agreed that their institutions had the infrastructure in place that allowed them to adapt to new circumstances in teaching practice. Comparing these results with those in Europe HEIs who reported that 97% of them had the necessary infrastructure in place, it is evident that Kosovo HEIs are far behind European ones in terms of readiness to act in a state of emergency. Nevertheless, even though European HEIs reported attentiveness and preparedness to promptly adapt to new circumstances, they indicated that keeping the communication flow with the students remained a challenge throughout the pandemic.

Furthermore, in evaluating their institution response and the availability of technical infrastructure to both students and the academic staff, the respondents highly evaluated the technical infrastructure in place and its availability; 41.7% evaluated it highly with scores 4 and 5, while 16.7% of respondents graded it with a score of 2 (1 being the lowest score, 5 being the top score.)

5. COVID-19 impact on research

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted research activities around the globe nevertheless it has also led to a massive influx of publications. According to (Harper, et al., 2020) more than 20,000 papers have been published since December 2019, many in prestigious journals. The UK department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy conducted a survey in 2020 on "The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on researchers in universities and research institutes" and attracted responses from 10,408 UK researchers. The survey showed firstly that the average weekly working hours for the participating researcher had decreased only slightly, with an overall 10% reduction in research hours. The decrease in hours is due to the type of research activities which cannot be done from home. There was a 96% decrease in the time researchers spent doing research in facilities such as laboratories and archives. Besides spending less time in laboratories

and archives, researchers also spent far less time doing academic networking. Young researchers were hit the hardest in comparison with the senior researchers with a reduction of 15 hours.

When asked which was the biggest challenge during COVID-19, researchers reported that the lack of access to labs and archives was the biggest challenge however now most of these researchers feel that they have experienced an increase in flexible working. Another study which was conducted in the US showed that COVID-19 has shown social, racial, and economic health disparities, the pandemic seems also to have accentuated existing gender inequalities within the field of research (Dorn, Sabin, & Cooney, 2020). On top of these challenges some early analyses suggest that female academics in comparison to their male colleagues published less (Vincent-Lamarre, Sugimoto, & Larivière, 2020).

Different research projects helped to prepare for COVID-19 and supported the outbreak response. The European Research Council (ERC) as the European funding organization for excellent frontier research has over 50 ongoing or completed ERC projects supported for a total value of about EUR 100 million are contributing to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic (European Research Council , 2020). The ERC projects are the EU's broader response to the COVID-19 pandemic as regards research and innovation.

Some of these projects include: Developing a new tool to diagnose Covid-19, How are older people coping with lockdown? Modeling human behavior to predict the course of the pandemic, Informed policymaking against COVID-19.

6. Other key challenges and potential opportunities and changes

Opportunities

Increased networking during the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly paved the way for higher education in Kosovo to expand its collaboration circles. It allowed numerous HEIs lecturers, students, researchers, and project administrators to enhance collaboration, joint project activities, internationalization, etc. Networking assisted higher education institutions in identifying ways in which earlier practices were erroneous and helped educational institutions connect effortlessly in bringing more informed decisions regarding collaboration plans and strategies within the departments and other HEIs, contributing to the improvement of networking practice.

One of the hopes is that the COVID-19 crisis will act as a wake-up call for Kosovo academia and scientific research community, prioritizing innovation, scientific work, collaboration, development and improvement of the scientific potential in the community, encouraging excellence and relevance of science, strengthening the links between the research and the society, on both local and international levels.

Another opportunity for Kosovo lies in a different culture of doing scientific research, which still may be in its infancy, but with significant potential, expectations. It plans to extend its activities beyond the traditional research approach. The National Research Programme of the Republic of Kosovo prioritizes the following areas in research planning: advancements in scientific research activities, participation in international scientific-research projects, systematic education of the scientific and research workers, and scientific information development and publishing of achieved scientific-research work results.

The pandemic has uncovered a need for the promotion of interdisciplinary research by conducting trustworthy, reliable, dependable, believable, plausible, and relevant to the issue of interest, and put to light the following:

•   The role of science in a pandemic situation

•   Development of different scientific collaboration methods;

•   Strengthening the links between research and society, encouraging effective response, and enhancing the   scientific culture;

·   Accumulation of knowledge and improvement of practice with an emphasis on rapid innovation and development practice;

·   Ensuring the further development based on solid knowledge and scientific norms, steering the opinion of the public in the prevention of rumors and pseudoscience;

[1] The National Research Programme of the Republic of Kosovo

Resource sharing

Resources sharing between higher education institutions in times of pandemic opened up a path for different aspects of collaboration, interdisciplinary approaches, updates of standard curricula, and improved communication between local and international partners, which can undoubtedly be described as holistic regarding the education approach.

Interdisciplinarity

During the pandemic, interdisciplinarity proved to be another important aspect for Kosovo and its education prospects, since numerous information and data interlaced between disciplines, giving an authentic purpose to the meaning of factual collaboration, focusing on digital transformation approach and digital tools.

Policies

-        Development of educational tools alternatives

-        Development of new pandemic resilient policies to support rapid of HEIs at the start of the new academic year

-        Identification of learning, research practice, mobility, and interaction practice to develop the adaptable social pattern approach.

-        Upgrade of technology-enhanced learning and utilizing the tech and software application.

Mitigation

Mitigation actions and strategies taken by the Kosovo government, institutions, businesses, and communities to protect their citizens and further prevent the spread of COVID-19 mainly were conducted on the go and depended on the development of the situation on the ground. Such efforts focused on preventing the community transmission of COVID-19 and decrease in overall communication while minimizing the adverse social or economic effects on society, imposing only necessary measures of quarantine, isolation, or closure of educational and public institutions or businesses.

Mobility The academic community in Kosovo has put up with enormous damages in internationalization, specifically reductions in mobility and international collaborations, research activities, exchange of students, study programs, and projects implemented by the EU, as the prominent supporter of higher education development in Kosovo. The pandemic has also affected the social interaction between students, staff, and their HEIs, whether on an individual or collective level, keeping people separated through physical/social distancing, restricting their involvement in social bonding activities, and creating gaps between students and staff and their HEIs. Such an atmosphere had affected the social and institutional relations between all actors involved in the everyday life of HEIs, academic staff, and students, decreasing identification and familiarization with the institution where students are studying and the overall engagement and ambition for further study intention.

Changes in the Future

After the pandemic ends and things start getting back to normal, Kosovo decision-makers need to assess the overall pandemic management, identify best practices and examples, and set priorities to be implemented in similar situations in the future by all Kosovo higher education institutions, aiming to provide answers to questions, such as: how has the Kosovo higher education responded to Covid-19 outbreak?

Despite the political turmoil and the early collapse of government at the very beginning of the pandemic, one must agree that Kosovo managed the crisis well, imposing immediately restrictive measures such as isolation, social distancing, mandatory wear of face masks, quarantine, closure of businesses and educational institutions, and at the moment, HEI's students and professors are looking forward to starting a new academic year with no or minimum restrictions.

The technological adaptability rate of HEI students and professors to the new ways of learning and teaching has been exceptionally high, paving ways to the potential development of new digitalization and learning innovation tools, such as:

- Development of educational services, applications, and resources

- Optimization of obsolete processes in education and adaptation of curricula

- Development of Quality Assurance (QA) digital transformation tools

- Development of training platforms for students and educators under new digital agenda

- Development of new digital strategy by the MEST and Kosovo HEIs

- Development of policies mitigating adverse effects of the pandemic

- Draft strategies that will support interdisciplinary professional programs, connecting different disciplines, driven by demand

- Introduction of hybrid teaching models in a pandemic situation.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

Considering the unknown nature of the COVID-19 virus and the ambiguities for future developments, it is essential to minimize the impact that it has on the quality and continuity of higher education provision. As the findings have shown, the majority of HEIs enhanced their teaching and learning capacities by introducing assistive technologies in the form of hardware (digital devices) and software (applications). Due to the limited access to assistive technology, a percentage of students from low-income families were left out of the learning process, raising socio-economic issues such as inclusion and equality. The Kosovo Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MEST), as well as numerous international organizations and local businesses, provided digital tools for those who were unable to participate in online learning activities. 96 percent of the pupils in Kosovo were able to participate in distance learning activities effectively throughout the lockdown as a result of these initiatives. The pandemic didn't catch HEIs in Kosovo off guard, according to statistics obtained from questionnaires distributed among staff and students, with 67.7% of respondents being positive (50 percent strongly agree and 16.7 percent

agree). Most of the educational institutions already had in place the infrastructure in order to shift quickly from in-person to virtual environments. The majority of individuals who responded affirmatively (50 percent + 16.7% = 66.7 percent) believed that their institutions had the infrastructure in place to adapt to new conditions in teaching practice, according to the findings. When compared to the results of European HEIs, which indicated that 97 percent of them have the essential infrastructure in place, it is clear that Kosovo HEIs lag considerably behind European HEIs in terms of emergency preparedness. When assessing the impact of COVID-19 on research overall, researchers said that the most difficult difficulty was gaining access to labs and archives; nonetheless, most of these researchers now believe that their working hours have become more flexible. COVID-19 has indicated social, ethnic, and economic health inequities, according to another study done in the United States. The pandemic also appears to have exacerbated existing gender inequalities within the area of research (Dorn, Sabin, & Cooney, 2020). Different research efforts, on the other hand, aided in the preparation for COVID-19 and aided in the outbreak response. The European Research Council (ERC), known as the European funding organization for exceptional frontier research, is assisting to the response to the COVID-19 epidemic by supporting over 50 ongoing or completed ERC projects worth over EUR 100 million (European Research Council , 2020). The ERC projects constitute the EU's broader research and innovation response to the COVID-19 epidemic.

Recommendations:

- Broadening cooperation of HEI for better provision of expertise on distance and online learning

- Establish functional mechanisms that allow joint progress in generating greater resilience capacity of the higher education sector when facing future crises.

- Forge a national consensus for a strategy to promote recovery and innovation in higher education

- Provide a clear regulatory environment in the reopening of classrooms that creates security; and commit to international cooperation.

- Anticipate a long-term suspension, focusing efforts on ensuring continuity of training and guaranteeing equity, generating efficient governance, monitoring and support mechanisms;

- Scale digitization, hybridization, and ubiquitous learning; as well as promoting internal reflection on the renewal of the teaching and learning model.