COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE

Impact and Mitigation Strategies in Europe and Central Asia

Summary Note

Since the arrival of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown in many Europe and Central Asia (ECA) countries, tertiary education institutions have had to move swiftly toward online provision to ensure continuity of teaching and learning and, at least to some extent, exams. It seems that this transition was comparatively easy for those countries that had invested in the sector and approached digitalization in a strategic way precrisis (for example, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany). Countries that had not developed a strategic approach toward digitalization did not provide the support; those that, more broadly, had seen decreasing investment in higher education faced significant difficulties. This goes beyond digitalization in the narrower sense and also applies to issues like student financing, quality assurance, and the status of academic staff.

This Summary Note offers the following 10 key recommendations to policy makers and tertiary education institutions, and to donors and multilateral agencies, on how to address the crisis.

1. Account for all staff and students, particularly those who were engaged in any mobility programs away from their home institutions, and support to the extent possible the return of staff and students to their home countries. While ensuring the continuity of teaching and learning is a key task, guidance and counseling need to be maintained during the crisis.

2. Address infrastructure issues and lack of equipment swiftly, to the extent possible. Share educational materials and resources among institutions. Many countries provide open-access resources; make sure they are known and available.

3. Take timely decisions on the academic calendar (exams, admission, graduation) based on epidemiological guidance and available information. Communicate them clearly, so that all the involved actors, particularly students and their families, can plan. However, be prepared to reassess and adapt quickly to rapidly evolving circumstances. Move ongoing and end-of-year exams online where possible.

4. Make equity a priority during the crisis and beyond. Provide additional support to at-risk students who are particularly affected by the crisis, to the extent possible. Where learning is discontinued, plan flexible measures to bring students back on board as soon as possible and help them catch up. Countries are encouraged to ease requirements for course completion and extend student funding arrangements (stipends, grants, loans).

5. Institutions should consider a freeze on staffing arrangements as long as it is feasible. The end of the crisis will provide a more opportune moment to consider medium-term staffing needs. Staff lost by institutions and academia in some cases might be difficult to bring back. Further, management needs to consider the specific situation of administrative staff, who are likely to be under pressure.

6. Communicate with current and prospective international staff and students, take care of their specific needs, and where decisions cannot be taken right away, provide flexibility and facilitate decision making. Countries are encouraged to extend visa arrangements. Institutions might want to consider additional "internationalization at home" measures in order to maintain student global learning efforts.

---

[1] This Summary Note is based on a paper prepared by Nina Arnhold, Lucia Brajkovic, Denis Nikolaev, and Polina Zavalina, all from Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region of the World Bank's Education Global Practice. While the paper focuses mainly on the ECA region, it draws on the World Bank's global note, "Tertiary Education and COVID-19" (http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/621991586463915490/WB-Tertiary-Ed-and-Covid-19-Crisis-for-public-use-April-9.pdf). The long version of the paper, "Tertiary Education and COVID-19: Impact and Mitigation Strategies in Europe and Central Asia," is forthcoming.

7. Work with <u>quality assurance</u> agencies to adjust quality assurance mechanisms to the crisis and the evolving situation. This concerns not only online learning but also established schedules and mechanisms for the accreditation and evaluation of programs and institutions.

8. Liaise with <u>pre-tertiary decision makers to find suitable joint solutions</u> in countries where university access is based on high-stakes exams. To ensure continuity of learning, it might be advisable to replace these exams with continuous assessment or find a suitable online option, where the circumstances allow, and facilitate equitable access to these options. Admission to tertiary institutions will need to be adjusted to the new circumstances.

9. <u>Ringfence public funding for tertiary education.</u> Decreasing funding for teaching and learning, research, and innovation will harm postcrisis economies in a lasting way.

10. <u>Plan for a gradual reopening,</u> prioritizing the areas that would need to be accessed at the earliest opportunity (for example, labs necessary for exams that cannot be conducted in any other mode), and analyzing the precautions (such as masks and number of people in the building), which should apply and could help speed up the process of reopening.