



CAREER SERVICES IN TIMES OF COVID-19

CHALLENGES, RESPONSES AND BEST PRACTICES

EMPLOYABILITY
WORKING GROUP



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Abstract:

Covid-19 has changed the setting of the labour market, impacting also on students' employability. It required University career services to deal in a new way with students and recruiters.

Young people are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis, experiencing multiple shocks from disruption to education and training, loss of employment, work experience and income, altered career plans, and a challenging jobs market. The youth unemployment rate in December 2020 was 17.8% in EU (14.8% in December 2019). Internship and placement numbers also fell significantly, along with part-time work opportunities. However, recruitment has continued, through expanded and accelerated online screening assessments and employer branding activities.

Career services have played a crucial role. This report draws on the experiences of career services in 12 Coimbra Group universities from across Europe, in responding to the challenges and opportunities created for students, graduates, employers and staff. It supports knowledge and practice sharing and underscores the position of career services at the nexus of student, university and employer relations.

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Career services in times of Covid-19: Challenges, Responses and Best Practices

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Executive summary

This report draws on the experiences of career services in 12 Coimbra Group universities from across Europe, in responding to the challenges and opportunities created by the Covid-19 for students, graduates, employers and staff. It supports knowledge and practice sharing and underscores the position of career services at the nexus of student, university and employer relations.

Students

Young people are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis, experiencing multiple shocks from disruption to education and training, loss of employment, work experience and income, altered career plans, and a challenging jobs market.

Students sought and valued reassurance and guidance: updated FAQs and webpages were insufficient, with high demand for direct one-to-one contact and advice. They were relieved by career service's priority to maintain and develop links with the labour market, and by their support for students to respond to the perceived challenges presented to their career paths.

The youth unemployment rate in December 2020 was 17.8% in EU (14.8% in December 2019), ranging from 6.1% in Germany or 9.5% in Netherlands to 40.7% in Spain or 29.7% in Italy (Eurostat, 2021).

Online services, as a means of accessing support and resources, and to learn and upskill, were seen as extremely positive, although digital and web tools did not fully compensate for human interactions and vibrant campus life.

The move of work experience and internships to remote and online, supported students financially but altered the package of skills, especially in terms of interpersonal relationships and interactions, that students could acquire during those work experiences.

Employers

Graduate recruitment numbers were scaled back and will remain depressed in 2021 recruitment, with the impact varying by sector and region. However, recruitment has continued, through expanded and accelerated online screening assessments, telephone & video interviews and online assessment centres.

Internship and placement numbers also fell significantly, along with part-time work opportunities. Employers also had less capacity to support student development activities, such as presentations and skills workshops.

The impact of pandemic over vacancies for part-time jobs for students and jobs for graduates that are managed by universities has been severe. Comparing the March-February periods for 2019-20 and 2020-21 years, there has been a reduction of 43,6% of part-time job vacancies, and of 42,6% of job vacancies.

Innovations, such as work-simulations and virtual careers fairs, have brought equality and inclusion benefits, widening access to career areas that students may previously have not considered or felt unable to access.

Realising the benefits of remote or digital delivery depends on all students being able to access appropriate technology and working spaces: the issue of digital poverty therefore needs to be kept in mind.

Career Services

Career services have played a crucial role in ensuring students understand the changing nature of the labour market, supporting them to look beyond bold media headlines and to adapt their career planning and job hunting based on sound information and advice.

Staff adapted quickly to new tools and new ways of collaborating, and were innovative in creating online content and implementing online interactions. The immediate pivot to online saw in-person consultations replaced by Teams and Zoom enabled meetings. Workshops and seminars were delivered online, through podcasts and blogs. Careers Fairs were delivered virtually, often with increased collaboration.

Data collected shows that in the cases that the external funding for career services exists, either private or public (through agreements with public institutions), it has been cut dramatically, ranging from 79,7% to 86,9% of the total external budget.

However, events, such as career fairs, are important sources of income for career services. Many services reduced or waived charges to recruiters: at the same time, investment in IT platforms was required and internal funding was squeezed. There is no guarantee these income streams will re-emerge, and services are therefore reviewing business models.

The innovations that resulted from this crisis, will enable career services to continue to respond to students' needs with hybrid solutions that harness the best of online and physical events and services.

1. Introduction

In mid-March 2020, the expansion of Covid-19 led to the confinement of the population of many countries, especially European ones. This necessitated, for universities in general, and for university career services in particular, very significant changes in the ways of working and providing their services. Changes, in some cases, that were already happening, but that the pandemic accelerated, and in other cases, the changes were radical. Changes that, in short, largely seem to have come to stay and to complement previous ways of working.

Given this situation, the member universities of the Employability Working Group (EWG) of the Coimbra Group (CG) prepared a questionnaire addressing various issues related to this new situation, with the goal of identifying a series of recommendations that serve to adapt to and reflect this new reality, and to disseminate good practices that help maintain the service to students and employers. This report is based on the analysis of the answers to that knowledge-sharing questionnaire. It underscores the importance of career services and their positioning in their respective universities, in the CG and in society in general. In a context marked by the economic crisis and the impact of the pandemic on the labour market, employability in universities is even more strategic, and this report therefore also offers valuable insights to policy makers.

1.1. The Employability Working Group of the Coimbra Group

Founded in 1985 the CG is an association of long established European multidisciplinary universities of high international standard. The CG is committed to creating special academic and cultural ties in order to promote internationalisation, academic collaboration, excellence in learning and research, and service to society. It is also the purpose of the CG to influence European education and research policy and to develop best practice through mutual exchange of experience. Forty-one Universities from twenty-three European countries are members of the CG.

The EWG is one of twelve CG working groups. It is included in the Education pillar, together with Doctoral Studies, Education Innovation, and Academic Exchange and Mobility. Twenty-seven Universities have a representative at the EWG, which is focussed on how to improve employability and job placement of students and graduates, in the context of a constantly changing job market, where new professions arise and new forms of work evolve. Universities must increasingly respond to this change by monitoring their training programs to meet the challenges in society of today. This is supported in a context of collaboration and exchange of experiences within the framework of the CG.

1.2. University career services

The name, structure and dimension of career services in universities is highly variable, depending on the internal and external realities of each university and the territory where it is located. This creates a very diverse panorama and in which it is difficult to define a model applicable to all realities. Despite this diversity, services maintain a very clear goal, to improve the employability of students and also the job placement of graduates, becoming a hub where students, academics (and training programs), as well as employers, institutions and companies outside the university, converge.

Given the relevance that the concept of employability has acquired, the weight that internships (both national and international) have acquired in training programs, and that the job outcomes have increasingly become one of the fundamental goals of universities, career services have also, been gaining relevance and dynamism in universities, although in certain contexts they may still maintain a certain marginality.

It should be noted that staff of career services are used to dealing with uncertainty - the job market is ever-changing - and supporting their students and graduates to do likewise. Periods of crisis or sudden change, such as the Covid-19 situation and the financial crisis of 2007, test our ability to offer a high-quality service that can adapt to new situations.

1.3. Methodological aspects

The basis of the report was a questionnaire distributed among university members of the EWG. The University of Geneva proposed a questionnaire structure inspired by a prior survey carried out by Swiss universities to analyse their Covid-19 responses. The questionnaire had 11 free-text items:

1. What was the situation at the University?
2. What were the main changes/highlights related to the Covid-19 crisis?
3. What were the challenges encountered?
4. How did the students react?
5. How did the career services change their services to respond to student needs?
6. How did employers react?
7. How did the career services change their services to respond to employer needs?
8. How did the careers team react?
9. What tools did we implement to facilitate the transition to working remotely?
10. What are the best practices in terms of adaptations to the Covid-19 situation?
11. Other comments

Twelve university members of the EWG answered the questionnaire: University of Geneva; Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi; University of Pavia; University of Würzburg; University of Göttingen; University of Turku; University of Barcelona; University of Cologne; University of Granada; The Jagiellonian University in Krakow; Trinity College Dublin; University of Edinburgh.

The questionnaire was sent to universities on 26 October 2020, and closed on 15 November 2020. A first analysis of the results was presented at the EWG meeting held on 10 December 2020, and the experience of the University of Pavia was presented on December 3 at the Coimbra Group Webinar: Challenges and future of internationalization in the European Knowledge Area.

In early 2021, additional data was collected regarding the cancellation of internships during the academic year 2019-2020, the evolution of number of vacancies in post laureatum internships, part-time jobs, and jobs, and also on the financial impact of the pandemic on budgets and staff resources. Despite the challenge in collecting data, due to the different contexts, and indicators, it has been useful to complement the information obtained from the questionnaire. The figures provide a preliminary insight into the impacts of pandemic. The objective was not statistically significant data, from which the general situation could be inferred, but rather data that allows the highlighting of trends and exemplifies what can be intuited from the questionnaire.

Finally, a third element that has served to prepare this report has been the authors' own knowledge and experience.

1.4. The Covid-19 situation and its challenges

If a common story could be written about the Covid-19 situation in all European universities, it would be that the new situation generated by Covid-19 began in mid-March 2020 when both students and university staff/academics are confined to their homes, and all activity shifts online. Those of the career services too, which must adapt to this new situation, which lasts initially to the end of the second semester of the 2019-20 academic year.

The first semester of the 2020-21 academic year begins as hybrid (in terms of teaching), which means that all or a significant part of the teaching activity remains online, and only some activities (e.g., seminars, internships, exams) are allowed to be held in person, with very controlled security measures (e.g., distance, hygiene, group size limitations). However, the passing of the weeks lead to scenarios in which, depending on the country, services had to return to online-only activities. Similarly, career services that reopened at the beginning of the 2020-21 academic year with different security measures in place (e.g., distance, shifts, minimum staff in person,) maintained much of the online activity, and were required to adapt to the changing situation.

The second half of the 2020-21 academic year, despite being optimistically planned at the beginning of the academic year, continued the trend of the online scenario. So, universities in general have had to adapt to teleworking and online education for a full academic cycle. Throughout this period, the career services at the universities have had to carry out their activity under very significant stress, for both internal and external reasons.

The lockdown meant that career services needed to transform their entire portfolio of services to a virtual format, with the aim of maintaining contact with students and employers. Some even increased their offers, in these moments of crisis being able to offer solutions, both to students and to employers. The use of digital platforms for communication or for the management of the various services has become widespread, with the parallel need for training and up-skilling of staff. This, combined with the lockdown and the need to overcome problems related to connectivity or computer equipment, the reconciliation of work and family at home, as well as the physical and emotional well-being of staff, has stretched and in some cases stressed career services, their leaders and their staff. Despite this, as will be seen throughout this report, the response has been exemplary.

It is also important to highlight that in some cases the economic crisis resulting from the pandemic caused a reduction in the career services' budget: income flows received by companies and governments, beyond the budget allocated by the universities themselves, were impacted. These reductions in budget sometimes led to staff cuts. The financial repercussions were not minor; virtual formats required the acquisition of various platforms and applications, as well as their implementation and maintenance, which often entailed new budgetary demands at a time of reduced income.

Externally, employers have in general reduced their offer of internships (which during the lockdown period, have also had to change their format to virtual) and their offer of jobs. The impact of this reduction has not been the same in all sectors, with some sectors more affected than others. Part-time job opportunities for students have been reduced, which has impacted their ability to finance their studies and gain valuable experience. This, combined with the persistence of youth unemployment, paints a very complicated panorama with which career services, responsible for employability and job placement of students and graduates, have to navigate.

In this sense, the crisis can be seen to have had a negative impact on the labour market. At European level, millions of workers have lost their jobs or have been placed under short-term work schemes. In September 2020, a survey from Eurofound pointed out that since the onset of the pandemic, 8%

of those working for an employer became unemployed¹. At the same time, millions more are teleworking, with emerging challenges in terms of work-life balance and working conditions². According to various reports, the decline in employment has been most severe for temporary employees, young professionals and workers with low levels of education, although it is noted that employment of workers with a high level of education was virtually unaffected by the pandemic, the youth unemployment rate increased significantly more than the overall unemployment rate³. The unemployment rate in December 2020 was 17.8% in EU (14.8% in December 2019), ranging from 6.1% in Germany or 9.5% in Netherlands to 40.7% in Spain or 29.7% in Italy (with no data available for Greece, that in October 2020 was 35%)⁴.

As regards the impact of the crisis on the youngest, it is not only that young people have been disproportionately affected by the job and hours losses ('last-in, first-out' phenomenon), but they also work in the hardest hit sectors with lower earnings and less job security. And there has been a major disruption of internships. Worldwide, the ILO highlights that young people constitute major victims of social and economic consequences of the pandemic, and there is a risk that they will be scarred throughout their working lives - leading to the emergence of a "lockdown generation". Young people are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis, with multiple shocks including disruption to education and training, employment and income losses, and greater difficulties in finding a job⁵.

The employment rates of recent graduates (aged 20-34) that were not in education and training, in the EU, began rising from 2013-2014, following the 2008 financial crisis, standing at around 79%. In 2019 this rate had reached 85%. There is no data available yet for 2020, in which surely, the crisis as a result of the pandemic will have had a similarly significant impact.

However, the picture is not straightforward, the crisis has had very different impacts on both geographical and sectoral levels. At a geographical level, and depending on the regional economic specialization, the main impact has been in some Southern European countries and Ireland, where the forcefully closed sectors (i.e., leisure activities, hospitality, personal services) represent an important share of total employment. These countries also have higher shares of self-employment and temporary contracts. Northern and Western European countries have been less exposed to the negative consequences of the crisis because of their higher rates in employment sectors that can more easily move online⁶.

The uncertainty from the pandemic, is combined with change and uncertainty in the future world of work, driven by existing factors, such as the fourth industrial revolution, global trade, demographic changes such as an ageing population, climate and sustainability. A McKinsey report predicts a scenario for Europe characterized by labour force shrinking, affected mainly by automation, that will

¹ Eurofound (2020), Living, working and COVID-19, COVID-19 series, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

[\[https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef20059en.pdf\]](https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef20059en.pdf)

² Torrejón, S. et al (2020). The asymmetric impact of COVID-19 confinement measures on EU labour markets. VOX, CEPR Policy Portal. [\[https://voxeu.org/article/covid-19-lockdown-and-eu-labour-markets\]](https://voxeu.org/article/covid-19-lockdown-and-eu-labour-markets)

³ Anderton, R. et al (2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the euro area labour market. ECB Economic Bulletin, Issue 8/2020 [\[https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/economic-bulletin/articles/2021/html/ecb.ebart202008_02~bc749d90e7.en.html#toc9\]](https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/economic-bulletin/articles/2021/html/ecb.ebart202008_02~bc749d90e7.en.html#toc9)

⁴ Eurostat (2021): Unemployment Statistics [\[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics#Youth_unemployment\]](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics#Youth_unemployment)

⁵ ILO (2020). ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Fourth edition Updated estimates and analysis. [\[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_745963.pdf\]](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_745963.pdf)

⁶ Torrejón, S. et al (2020). The asymmetric impact of COVID-19 confinement measures on EU labour markets. VOX, CEPR Policy Portal. [\[https://voxeu.org/article/covid-19-lockdown-and-eu-labour-markets\]](https://voxeu.org/article/covid-19-lockdown-and-eu-labour-markets)

affect occupational categories and demographic groups unevenly, increasing demand for higher-level skills and a job growth more geographically concentrated than before⁷ (McKinsey, 2020).

The challenges for career services are extraordinary, due to their magnitude, the situation to which the pandemic has led us, and because of their relevance in the future of our society.

⁷ McKinsey (2020). The future of work in Europe Automation, workforce transitions, and the shifting geography of employment. McKinsey Global Institute.
[<https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/future%20of%20organizations/the%20future%20of%20work%20in%20europe/mgi-the-future-of-work-in-europe-discussion-paper.pdf>]

2. The students' response

2.1. Campus life

As has been said, between the end of February and the middle of March 2020, Universities had to close their campus due to Covid-19. Students, as well as academic and support staff, could not freely access university structures. Rectors received weekly national governmental dispositions with measures to limit Covid-19 diffusion. Those regulations prescribed what people must not do: students knew they should not leave their homes, they couldn't go to campus, attend lessons, take exams, practice internships, etc... Students swiftly realised that the Covid-19 quarantine was not going to finish quickly and that the isolation and restrictions would change multiple aspects of their social lives, families and academic habits. This global sanitary pandemic was introducing itself as an event without precedent in recent history. Students could not find a "recipe" to manage it on the web.

From that moment, many students identified the University as their main source of answers and advice, often not only for academic questions but also for other items such as travelling rules, medical insurance, health and psychological wellbeing related to Covid-19. Students needed answers on specific questions and reassurance. Perhaps like never before, students, both one by one and through their academic representatives, started to write to the Rectors, the Deans, the Professors and the academic staff.

Despite the Universities constantly updating FAQs and web news about Covid-19 dispositions for academic and social life, students sought direct one-to-one contact and advice. Furthermore, despite having a lot of social communities (WhatsApp, Instagram IDM, Facebook groups) they also started to individually write to the Universities, instead of writing as a class or group. It was as if the isolation was pervading students and lost the sense of community that is one of the essences of a university campus. Students expressed feelings of anxiety, frustration, they needed to believe that they were not totally abandoned. They complained about the lack of adequate information regarding all the measures taken at the institutional level. They needed a lot of practical information to prevent and manage this new life setting.

Rectors highlighted the importance of accompanying and being close to their students. Among our universities we have examples of new task forces put in place during Covid-19 emergency that became relevant for students' wellbeing and sense of security:

- crisis unit and covid manager for the Covid-19 practical management, in order to allow the most effective coordination of all the University activities and to address students' duties (outgoing/incoming mobility, travelling to home, sanitary provisions for Covid-19 risk, testing);
- psychological counselling services to support student's psycho-physical wellness.

2.2. Curricular and extracurricular activities for students

Students wondered if Covid-19 would distort their studies and indirectly their career opportunities too. After campus closing, as part of "emergency" response, rectors encouraged university staff to do everything possible to hold e-learning courses and to move student services online. The objective was that no student should be left behind and that the university would continue to do everything in

its power to accompany them and be close to them in those difficult days. It became important for students to understand that universities were acting as fast as possible to guarantee lessons, exams and services. They appreciated that the educational and extracurricular activities didn't stop completely and continued online. Postponing an academic activity into the next semester was no longer seen as a solution by some students (even where previously this had been commonplace) but was seen as a risk that they were reluctant to take. Students wanted to understand the way to pursue their academic tasks, without losing time. They were anxious to know how the semester and the next one would be carried out.

Internships were disrupted, both for those ongoing during the Covid-19 outbreak and for the ones starting in the second semester of 2020. Career services supported trainees and hosting partners in order to avoid cancellations. Students found in career services the help to comply with national and regional legislation, to transform or start virtual/smart internships (that was a novel experience), to set up documents to assure the health measures in the external entities, to implement digital signatures and management of internships and to encourage flexibility of internship evaluation criteria. Students were relieved by career service's priority to maintain and develop links with the labour market, and by their attitude to help students overcome the impasse that Covid-19 crisis was perceived to present in their career paths.

The measures adopted by career services have paid off: from those universities that data has been collected, it could be stated that curricular and extracurricular internships for students have suffered a low percentage of cancellations (a mean of 4,5%, that ranges from 10% maximum to 0,89% minimum). The impact over international internships and over Erasmus internships has likely been higher, as well as the impact over post lauream internships. The number of post lauream opportunities has suffered a reduction of around 20%.

2.3. The labour market: loss of part-time students' jobs and first hiring's

The impact of Covid-19 on the labour market was multi-layered, the economic crisis that resulted from the efforts to contain the sanitary crisis had multiple repercussions on students. The threat of rising unemployment rates became even more salient, as students feared companies would freeze their hiring processes and they would not find internship opportunities or first post-graduation labour market opportunities.

The disruption to the labour market was not only in terms of reduced first employment opportunities for young professionals. It also strongly impacted part-time student jobs that provide a first professional experience, competency development opportunities and a form of first income for many students. These part-time jobs provided a first exposure to the labour market and provided opportunities to also learn important transferable skills and work ethic. The closure of commercial activities (shops, cafés, restaurants, etc.) ended part-time jobs that many students needed to finance their student life and education. Not only did these employment opportunities become scarcer but many students were laid-off or furloughed.

Other forms of students' employment, such as part-time jobs offered by the universities themselves for instance were moved online. In these cases, students didn't lose income but found themselves with the challenges of working and integrating to a team remotely. It changed the package of skills, especially in terms of interpersonal relationships and interactions, that students could acquire during those work experiences. We are facing the risk of having "home generation students" that spend increased time at home and losing experiences to develop many interpersonal, communication and organizational skills.

If students found fewer job and internship offers and the ads recruited mainly targeted specific disciplines (e.g., engineering, economics, medicine and healthcare), on the contrary placement, career guidance services and employer branding sessions were available for **all** students, also from disciplinary areas suffering more due to the Covid-19 crisis. It was important that career services worked to also counterbalance the labour market trends, providing support & tools useful for students from all fields, including those studying/working in areas most affected by the pandemic. Here are some examples of inclusive activities that career services offered students:

- alerts, initiatives and "pills" of career guidance and webinars about transversal topics (soft skills, strategic thinking...) adaptable to the various disciplinary areas;
- online panels or meetings with specialists and professors, training sessions, mentoring programs including university alumni, to offer a view from inside the labour market;
- work-life webinar series with panellists external from the university discussing different topics with career service professionals.

The career services observed increased interest and participation of students in placement activities during the second semester of 2019-2020 academic year. For instance, there was an increase in one-to-one counselling sessions and greater participation in career events. Students emailed asking for a podcast when they couldn't attend a live meeting. Beyond podcast and offline video delivery, students wondered if those meetings would be replicated live in the next year. Students refused to lose any formative opportunity that the Universities offered them. The interest for placement and counselling activities was quite common to all the classes, not just to the students enrolled in their final year. First and second-year students, who are generally further from the labour market, also started to collect placement information "to be aware for the next few years".

The impact of the pandemic over vacancies for part-time jobs for students and jobs for graduates that are managed by universities has been significant. Comparing the March-February periods for 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 years, there has been a reduction of 43,6% of part-time job vacancies, and of 42,6% of job vacancies, with a maximum of 59% of the former and of 55% in the later.

2.4. The new online setting

Students spent all day in front of their notebooks/laptops for academic issues, they were not attracted to a mere online transposition of careers guidance and employer branding meetings in which they would passively attend. Students participated actively in "digital friendly" placement services. It required a new model, customized for online communication, that avoided loss of students' interaction in blended modality, especially in group activities:

- new initiatives to suit new delivery methods, i.e., increasing the use of videos and podcasts or interactive tools such as Mentimeter, Kahoot, Miro, Wooclap, Moodle, live documents, etc.;
- one-to-one via video conferencing (Zoom, Googlemeet, Teams) especially for counselling meetings;
- webinars restricted to no longer than 90 minutes;
- students can listen to the discussions and place questions before and during the webinars;
- preferred live sessions to podcasts in order to compensate for students' lack of relationship with mates;
- single day events, became 'career weeks' as we can't expect students to spend a whole day in front of a virtual career fair;

- avoiding duplication of what is already online and adding value; i.e., company's presentations on professions and case studies, not the company's business that is already available online;
- more interactive options: Q&A forms, chatbox.

Covid-19 restrictions created new 'free-time' for many students, enabling them to do activities they had not done before. In order to encourage students, career services organized online guidance to enhance and improve students' use of placement tools (curriculum database; new Europass model...). More students have consulted website pages and career guidance lectures online compared to before the pandemic. This increase may be partly because the situation forced people to stay at home, but that may not be the only explanation. It might be that students felt more convenient and comfortable with the online form that allowed them to participate easily and combine better extracurricular activities with lectures or other duties. Also, the accessibility of some tools and initiatives via mobile apps has increased students' use.

Students consider online services a further resource to learn and upskill but digital and web tools did not fully replace human interactions that characterize campus life. Beyond online activities, students wanted to find and interact with people online. They were happy to meet career service staff in a digital setting and they showed good acceptance of telephone and virtual counsel. Students called and emailed staff directly also to receive information about employer branding and placement counselling initiatives organized by career services. In some cases where students were unable to have 1-1 interactions, such as at the end of seminars, the impact on the quality of service was similar to that in academic learning and teaching, e.g., an inability to respond to specific individual contexts or questions.

2.5. Reactions and feedbacks

Students were happy when everything worked and in some cases were surprised that student services were operating. They were extremely grateful that career guidance services were maintained. Feedback has been very good; students especially appreciated the relaxed but competent atmosphere. A good percentage of students' engagement is due to the capacity to offer different ways of interacting: one-to-one, streaming or podcast open to all interested parties, as well as small targeted groups sessions. Students and young graduates responded positively and actively to new tools of placement counselling and online meetings with companies. Digital delivery proved to be more convenient and allowed for faster response in some cases. Services were able to engage harder-to-reach students or those who may not have traditionally engaged with them, and were pleased by the low level of drop-out from events and activities, despite concerns about digital fatigue. However, the benefits of remote or digital delivery will always be correlated to accessibility, and so the issue of digital poverty therefore needs to be kept in mind and also addressed within universities.

The high levels of students' engagement underline the utility and need for career service in a challenging situation. Students were obviously worried about the lack of opportunities in finding a rewarding career or work at all but the forced digital leap in terms of placement services worked very well. The students' participation and interest in career guidance activity during Covid-19 emergency confirmed the relevance of the new measures put in place by the career services. In blended and online services students appreciate the effort to maintain the interactions that characterize campus life. Students want to be reassured that their university continues to work for their accountability and engagement in the labour market, ensuring both mandatory learning activities and extra academic training like the ones organized by the career services.

3. The Recruiter Perspective

As universities and career services were rapidly adapting to working from home and disrupted business models, the same was true of the employers, third sector and public bodies who recruit our students. There were two strands to recruiter reactions:

- Anticipating the economic impact and consequent change in recruitment needs;
- Adapting to new ways of working.

There is significant diversity across the range of organisations recruiting students and new graduates. The initial impact was felt differently across sectors: industries such as hospitality, retail, creative and leisure were harder hit than others, such as tech, finance and construction. Small-Medium Enterprises were also hit hard, with many in survival mode and without the capacity to readily use online attraction and recruitment activities. Career services were therefore adapting their offer to respond to and meet different needs and expectations.

Recruiters were looking to, and grateful for, the insights and expertise that career services were able to provide. As disruption from the pandemic continued, career services worked collaboratively with recruiters to identify and support new ways of working, many of which provided additional benefits to both recruiters and students.

3.1 Changed recruitment needs

The economic impact of the pandemic has had a direct impact on organisations staff needs, leading to changed student and graduate recruitment. As Section 2.3 indicates, this saw a reduction in vacancies being advertised. However, the experience of the 2007-8 financial crisis, meant larger recruiters were often balanced in their response, recognising a need to maintain a talent pipeline. Recruitment cycles for many organisations were well underway and many honoured offers which had been made, and reduced rather than stopped recruitment completely. The demand in 2021 is likely to see a continued reduction, however the impact will vary across industries and the rate of recovery is unlikely to be even.

Career services have been crucial in ensuring students understand the changing nature of the labour market - supporting them to look beyond bold media headlines and to adapt their career planning and job hunting based on sound information and advice. Regular newsletters, blogs and webinars on navigating the pandemic job market are available to students. This support has also been supplied to recent graduates who may find themselves unemployed or in more precarious employment.

The demand for student talent, through placements, internships and part-time work, was also severely impacted, as has been pointed out in the previous chapter. As the pandemic continued, where it was possible to work remotely some employers were able to recruit, onboard and support internships and placements. This was more challenging in disciplines with practical applications. Career services teams were proactive in sourcing and promoting opportunities to their students.

While not fully replacing the experience of remote and on-site work experiences for students in both financial and personal-development terms, work-simulations are a pandemic driven innovation that has brought benefits. Interactive case studies and job simulation exercises enable students to gain insight into more and wider ranges of career options. As well as supporting informed career planning,

this also supports equality and inclusion, widening access to career areas that students may previously have not considered or felt inaccessible. As mentioned previously, realising these benefits depends again on all students being able to access appropriate technology and working spaces.

3.2. Pivot to online engagement and recruitment

Following understandable initial confusion, like career services, large scale recruiters quickly expanded and accelerated existing online activity. Many were already using online screening assessments, and telephone or video interviews. The use of online assessment centres was accelerated and new/adapted tools were implemented for recruitment and outreach. This enabled organisations to continue planned hires, although some organisations temporarily paused new recruitments. As the length and scale of the disruption continued, large scale recruiters invested in new initiatives to sustain their profile and visibility amongst students and to continue to ensure a talent pipeline. For instance, some created virtual-reality platforms that enabled students to ‘meet’ staff, attend webinars and explore the opportunities within the organisations; developing virtual work experience, ranging from digital work simulation activities to remote working internships. Examples include:

- PwC’s Virtual Park⁸: Designed to represent their office spaces in a Virtual Reality setting, PwC’s Virtual Park gives students a real insight into our working environment. They are able to create an avatar, walk around our park and take part in events;
- Virtual Onboarding⁹;
- Thales providing advice to students which explains the changed context¹⁰;
- Supporting pan-European recruitment through Virtual Careers Fairs¹¹;
- Virtual career insight platforms¹².

Initial pressure and uncertainty also saw some traditional activities reduced. Employers had less capacity to support some student development activities such as presentations and skills workshops, which may have been seen as useful but less essential to student engagement and profile raising. Awareness of mental wellbeing flowed into student and graduate recruitment activity, with some recruiter’s conscious of the pressures on the Class of 2020 (and 2021), recognising that future recruitment models will benefit from combining technology and humanity.¹³

All career services have adapted their offer to provide employers with different ways of addressing their aims and challenges, investing in new ways of supporting recruitment, through virtual events and software. Examples include:

- a new “Companies Showcase” within a placement platform, creating a permanent Virtual Fair where students and graduates can learn more about the companies;
- online graduate recruitment fair in July 2020, open to students from multiple universities to support both employers and students;

⁸ <https://www.pwc.co.uk/careers/student-careers/undergraduate-graduate-careers/ourevents/virtual-park.html>

⁹ <https://www.zuehlke.com/en/insights/can-virtual-onboarding-work-we-say-yes>

¹⁰ <https://www.thalesgroup.com/en/united-kingdom/news/nine-tips-recruiting-during-covid-19>

¹¹ <https://www.jobteaser.com/en/events/77971-international-virtual-fair-subscribe-now>

¹² <https://www.theforage.com/course-catalog>

¹³ <https://ineucs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2020Strong-INEUCS-final-v1.pdf>

- online panel Q&As for a sector with participants (often alumni) representing several different employers;
- Some Universities also temporarily waived their participation fees and/or their publication fees for posting job & internship offers on their employment platforms in order to encourage employers to still recruit students. As will be explored later on, these actions impacted the income flows of some of the career services and may have long-lasting consequences for their business models.

Without the need to travel or have a physical presence, digital delivery enables a wider range of organisations to engage, and can make attendance more convenient for students, resulting in higher sign-up rates. Online events also allow organisations to maximize on their resources and outreach and invite multiple university students to attend one same career event. Recording of seminars and events also means these can be made available after the fact for students who are unable to attend. Furthermore, staff reported students engaging positively in Q&A via chat functionality, which supports wider learning for all participants. This can increase the reach, visibility and impact of employer engagement - benefiting both employers and students.

4. The response by the Careers teams

4.1 New setting

As mentioned in the previous chapters, university career services have implemented, developed and launched new tools and strategies to continue pursuing their main objectives, particularly to encourage relations between university students and graduates and the labour market (both employers and host partners for internships). The sudden change from physical interaction on campus with colleagues, students or employers to online interactions was a huge challenge to all services.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic it was clear career services staff should put all their efforts into avoiding negative outputs of this new situation. Our survey clearly showed that in March 2020 career services had different levels of:

- online placement services for students and for stakeholders;
- staff knowledge of IT tools, both for delivering career services activities, and to organize and manage workstations at home;
- resources that could be freely invested in new or increased IT materials and tools/programs.

These three items and the extent to which career services could or were able to implement and increase them impacted significantly on their performance from March 2020 to date. In particular, as institutions operate in different countries, they face different budgeting regulations: only public or with external provision; central university budget, or autonomous spending administration, etc.

Despite different configurations and funding models, the crisis brought on a disruption to income streams for many services to varying extents. For some institutions this meant a reduction of staff (i.e. no more fixed-term contracts) or a reduction of external funding's for specific projects. For others, the pandemic created additional costs related to implementing new tools in an emergency response (i.e. career fair online platform) or IT devices, tools and staff training on how to use those new tools. There were some services that were not dependent on external funding or did not need to buy new tools, that managed to save on funding. In this case, some quotas were allocated to support students' increased needs, such as for internship travel or sponsorship.

Some universities charged participation fees for events, such as careers fairs, and these were an important source of income for the career services. Most have reduced or waived fees for recruiters as a result of the pandemic, with consequent impacts on their financial position – often at a time when their internal funding is being squeezed. Data collected shows that in the cases where career services were dependent on external funding - either private or public (& through agreements with public institutions) - it has been cut dramatically, ranging from 79,7% to 86,9% of the total external budget. In one case, income directly from the University (operational budget, not including salary costs) has been completely cut. At the same time, income reduction has resulted in some level of staff reduction - either full time contract staff (with reductions from 11,1% to 50%) or part-time contract staff, (to a lesser extent).

In combination with the structural and budgeting impacts, Covid-19 also had an effect on staff wellbeing and engagement. This is why some universities introduced psychological support for administrative staff. In these stressful and emotional times, additional measures were necessary to help people accept and absorb the impacts of the crisis and to adapt to the new reality.

4.2 Inside the teams

Initially the shift to working from home created uncertainty in dealing with technical problems, however, that changed quickly. Similarly to the previous sections, there was a wide range of reactions to this radical change: some staff enjoyed working from home more than others, some had difficulty adjusting, and for some, the isolation started to take a toll as time went by. Additionally, some colleagues experienced the change to working from home as a lack of space and/or an intrusion of privacy. In our survey, we have an example of a university that collected suggestions and identified critical issues in the new working methods. The results will be used to propose improvements in the application of agile and remote work in 'ordinary' times - something that is likely to be seen across many organisations. Some particular considerations for remote working, included:

- supply of computer equipment;
- streamlining of reporting procedures;
- preservation of interpersonal relationships and communication;
- work and network connections;
- digitization of documents and resources.

The need for personal contact and spontaneous exchange emerged as one of the greatest losses of daily working time. Lack of colleague contact outside the computer screen was often the hardest element for people. More time and effort are required to solve the small but frequent problems that used to be easily resolved by a casual conversation.

In addition to regular meetings, information and inspirations are transmitted spontaneously and informally, particularly when the team is small as in many career services. Remote working increased bilateral contacts, mainly via video calling, but also through "informal" tools such as WhatsApp, for example, to replace the coffee break customs. It altered structures for communication, appointments and collaborations. Co-working with digital tools was often seen as challenging but fun. Resilience and learning skills became more important. Staying in touch with colleagues has entailed regular online team meetings, in some cases on a daily basis. Some teams even implemented coffee-break meetings in order to maintain and try to encourage informal exchanges.

A particular challenge was maintaining engagement with colleagues and partners beyond immediate teams, including academic colleagues in other departments, which was exacerbated by their pressure to move to online lecturing.

The teams were proactive in upskilling and in coming up with new ways of doing things to maximise the student experience. Working together and maintaining team spirit became even more important for staff involvement, morale and motivation. As for the reasons behind the satisfaction, the report does not register a greater loss of organizational efficiency, rather staff focused on maintaining productivity and objective-centred activities.

4.3 Online settings

Working at home created challenges related more to work arrangements than to customer relationships. Careers teams had to react to the new situation overnight and move their whole provision online without being prepared for it. Some team members felt the impact of being on their own at home, which can lead to decreased confidence, particularly with regards to using technology. It had to be accepted that some might find it difficult at times, and may need extra support.

Further challenges of working from home include poor or unreliable Wi-Fi connection, software or hardware problems. Working on a personal device can also have implications in performance, accessibility and management of some material such as student data. Some staff resources had been stressed by these technical settings. Working at home implies adaptations:

- of domestic space to work space;
- to use digital tools;
- of the contents of the actions to a virtual format.

It has been highlighted, however, how well colleagues with higher-level digital skills have supported those who were less confident and how everybody was willing to upskill and learn how to use different platforms/programs. The members with better tech skills took the responsibility to help their colleagues by suggesting tools (platforms, applications etc.). Where there were large gaps between the team members' confidence and skill, the more tech-savvy were often relied-upon, risking greater workloads and pressures to initiate and implement ideas.

Most of the pressing problems related to hardware and software. To overcome this problem and become confident with the new digital tools, staff organized periodic team training, peer support and problem-solving sessions via meeting platforms. With pressure to move core learning and teaching online, support services were often unable to access advice from their IT and learning technology teams.

Staff adapted to new needs and to digital issues and input, experimenting day by day to find the best way to achieve work objectives. On the whole, digital administration and university systems worked quite well. The comments in the survey regarding the teams' responses have been overwhelmingly positive and complimentary. Staff members adapted extremely well by learning new tools and new ways of collaboration with some staff being more IT literate than others. Team members have been innovative and creative in creating online content and implementing online interaction.

4.4. A new way to deal with students and recruiters

As outlined in the previous sections, career services moved the entire offer of services online. As with all university staff, they spent time putting in place new management of administrative tasks to support stakeholders. Career service staff understood immediately that the new online setting did not mean a simple replication of office processes, rather a blended translation of processes and procedures, using new tools. Placement and career guidance required individual services and responses, both to students and recruiters. The personal relations aspects of tasks are central to many career services activities. In other settings, career services activity is highly administrative and regulated by law, for instance internships management. For example, staff supported employers individually to understand regulation on traineeship in a Covid-19 context (e.g. safety issues), and helped trainers and host organizations to transform and commence internships in agile and remote formats. Staff also evaluated the activities, training path objectives and skills acquired to ensure they conformed with the student's academic backgrounds and requirements.

Student, alumni, employer and regular team meetings have gone well and are now considered effective, normal practice. Online Q&A sessions were cited as an example of improved engagement compared to a physical format. And local collaboration has also increased, for example partnering with other universities in the region to promote an EU careers webinar.

Career services adapted to the online environment and became more open and skilled in creating online content, succeeding in quickly transforming in person interactions into one-to-one web

meetings. Staff responded with resilience, flexibility and foresight, drawing out learning and identifying and harnessing the benefits of digital delivery, creating new tools and resources to support students, and to keep employers and students in touch with each other. Staff were conscious that these digital changes were a step into future models of delivery.

The involuntary move to online provision and adaptation to the new normal has led to many career guidance practices that are considered beneficial. Positive feedback, increased participation and engagement in online employer events, career guidance webinars and skill training sessions, among other activities, have furthered career services plans for hybrid provision of events and services in the longer term.

There have been positive responses from students and employers to many changes made. It is likely that online fairs and events will remain in some format, as they reduce the personal and environmental impact of needing to travel and also increase access. Work simulation activities and virtual internships allow students to experience a more diverse range of occupations and organisations, however these are unlikely to fully satisfy the demand for 'real' work experience.

Charged events and services, such as careers fairs, are an important source of income for many career services. Most have reduced or waived charges to recruiters as a result of the pandemic, with consequent impacts on their financial position – often at a time when their internal funding is also being squeezed. Career services will seek to balance income generation with the benefits to students from these new ways of working, and to understand what the market will bear for online engagement.

Weathering a year of disruption has been possible due to the collaborative partnerships career services have with employers. Solutions have been developed together, learning has been shared and students have been at the heart of this. These partnerships will continue to be vital as we emerge from the pandemic.

4.5. A new set of tools

As has been highlighted, new online services required new tools. The first challenge faced by many services, was the right choice of tools and platforms. They had to provide a balance between accessibility and ease of use on the one hand and security on the other hand, as they need to be used from home. And no less important, for some, additional resources had to be deployed not only for the acquisition, implementation and maintenance of new software, but also for training on how to use it.

Unsurprisingly, the most popular tools mentioned for video-conferencing and 1-1 support are Zoom and Microsoft Teams, but Blackboard Collaborate, WebEx, Skype and Big Blue Button have also been used. After Zoom addressed initial security concerns, it became a suitable platform for many institutions for hosting events and workshops as it was specifically designed for video-conferencing. In Germany, the platform Big Blue Button has become popular for online teaching at educational institutions and has been used by career services. Microsoft Teams as part of the Microsoft 365 suite became a natural choice especially for staff meetings when it was rolled out across certain universities.

Nevertheless, there were obstacles to the use of digital platforms. Some career services are required to run more security checks than others. They need to ask their university's data protection unit for permission to use external platforms for employer events or virtual careers fairs, whereas others can use platforms such as Zoom or Teams with certain caveats such as requiring authentication by

external users such as alumni or employers. Another hurdle can be staff's lack of confidence in the use of new online applications. Accessibility to technology and appropriate WIFI connections for both students and/or staff working from home have also impacted the decision on how to engage with colleagues, students or employers. As a result, traditional tools such as emails and telephone conversations have also been used and deemed appropriate.

In some cases, careers fairs have been adapted to a virtual format, which required specific platforms, like GraduateLand and Career Fair Plus, among others. Again, for some this had significant additional cost and security implications, whereas for others it didn't. Another careers-specific platform mentioned is TargetConnect, which is a common online booking platform for appointments and events for students. Other generic tools such as MS Forms or Google Meet supported collaboration. Cisco Client, Cisco Jabber and SharePoint as well as Mural and MeisterTask, EventsAIR, LiveChat, Remo, Xerte and Learn were also mentioned, adding a wide range of possibilities to use platforms for the management of events, activities and meetings. Each career service has found a solution tailored to its possibilities and its environment, but the exercise of seeking these solutions has been common to all and has often required significant staff time.

5. Conclusions and best practices

5.1. Best practices

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic changed the way we work, and brought on a digital leap in every aspect of our lives including education and employment. The career services of the universities participating in the EWG were able to innovate and adapt their services in order to continue best serving their students' needs. As part of a knowledge sharing initiative the following best practices were identified by 12 universities.

5.1.1 Internal Administrative Procedures:

Universities adapted their internal processes and procedures in order to facilitate the digitalization of their services.

Retained Innovations:

- Creation of a Crisis Unit to coordinate and effectively communicate on university activities and measures resulting from the spread of Coronavirus;
- Implementation of weekly team meetings online. Some universities even implemented weekly “coffee break” meetings in order to maintain morale and allow for important yet casual social interactions within the teams;
- Implementation of virtual tools as a way to increase the number of students/graduates that can participate in counselling sessions and workshops;
- The use of digital signatures in order to facilitate the management of internship agreements, allowing for a more timely and sustainable way to process requests.

5.1.2 Career-related services for Students and Employers:

Career-related services for students had to be adapted not only in their delivery (form) but also in their conception (content) as universities transitioned from an emergency response to finding suitable long-term solutions in the current context. Universities had to establish which content could be adapted and had to be prioritized to continue helping student employability. Maintaining contact with students, new graduates and employers became of the utmost importance as well as continuing to create opportunities for them to interact with one another.

Retained Innovations:

- Implementation of online tools that allow one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many interactions and exchanges in order to maintain relationships with students/graduates, employers, partners and stakeholders;
- Implementation of designated channels to remain in contact with students/graduates and to listen to their needs, (i.e. one-on-one sessions, online questionnaires, Q&A chat sessions online, etc.) and create time and space for them to be heard;
- Development of new tailored online resources to support students/graduates including but not limited to online workshops, webcasts, tutorials and self-study toolkits on topics that are important for them;

- Implementation of tools that allow for a greater interaction with students online (chats, whiteboards, surveys, quizzes, etc.) and course design that considers screen fatigue and ensures practical and engaging exercises/content (i.e. length of online workshops and courses). The use of pre-course reading or video materials to allow greater discussion time during workshops;
- Greater engagement with alumni mentoring to support students/graduates in building their professional networks online;
- Implementation of joint webinars and career events in collaboration with other universities, promoted via channels of both institutions. Online events allow for greater flexibility in terms of attendance and allow companies to target multiple audiences at once saving on valuable resources;
- Creation of permanent virtual careers fairs where students and graduates can learn more about different companies;
- Outreach campaigns engaging with employers, partners and stakeholders in order to encourage them to continue employing, training and sponsoring students/graduates during this economic crisis and to fight against the soaring student unemployment rates. In order to promote employment opportunities, some Universities made the publication of job ads temporarily free on their platforms. Others conducted campaigns to fundraise specifically for scholarships and grants and revised the conditions of access to such aid.

5.1.3 Wellbeing support services

The pandemic and the restrictions put in place to fight it brought on many additional stressors that took a toll on people's mental health and wellbeing.

Retained Innovations:

- Implementation of a free Psychological Counselling Service (online or by telephone) for students/graduates, teachers and technical-administrative staff;
- Implementation of free online courses promoting psycho-social and physical wellbeing (i.e. mediation, fitness classes, etc.) for students/graduates, teachers and technical-administrative staff.

5.2. Conclusions

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic turned people's lives upside down and changed the way we work and relate to one another. The crisis forced us to innovate, to rethink the way we do things and to reassess our priorities. Universities had to adapt their services in order to continue best serving their students needs'. The digital transition online brought its own set of challenges, but also, its own set of advantages and opportunities for collective learning. Universities were able to explore which activities lend themselves more or less well to online formats and which ones require in person interactions. Students, teachers, and professionals alike had to learn to use a plethora of digital tools and skills in order to continue interacting with one another. Together we learnt the importance of competencies such as resilience, openness to change, adaptability, flexibility, autonomy, learning skills and empathy.

Some of the innovations that were implemented will reveal themselves as transient and others will become a permanent part of the way career services are delivered. Services such as one-to-one

counselling which are suited to in-person exchanges will return in the future but will be complemented by the additional option to have them online. Other services such as online employer presentations open to multiple universities (joint or group initiatives) may remain remote as they allow companies to efficiently maximise their outreach efforts. The wish for the future is not to keep all services online, but rather to provide a combined and hybrid offer with both digitally friendly services and face to face interactions and learning opportunities. The innovations that resulted from this crisis, will enable services to better respond to students' needs with hybrid solutions between online and physical events and services.

As outlined in the report the consequences of the pandemic were manifold including for the career services themselves. Beyond having to innovate and adapt the offer of their services (format, content, accessibility etc.) some services found their income flows largely disrupted. The financial implications of the crisis created a need for additional funding support to continue providing quality services to students.

The crisis had serious implications on students' access to employment opportunities across the board (internships, traineeships, part-time students' jobs and young-professional jobs). Students despaired as their career prospects withered with the closing of business sectors. They felt isolated and lost with regards to their future, resulting in more individual requests for help within the universities and specifically to career services. Companies also found themselves having to change the way they recruit and interact with young talent. They had to find innovative ways to maintain recruitment pipelines and remain visible to students.

The crisis highlighted the unique and important role of career services in being the connector between employers, students and academia during this difficult time. Our added-value as facilitators and connectors gained traction during this time of isolation and career services more than ever have provided inclusive services, and ensured help for those students whose areas of work were particularly impacted by the crisis. EU policy makers should support employment, employability and career services within Universities in order to avoid a scenario in which the Covid-19 graduates becomes a lost generation in the labour market.



A Tradition of Innovation