



PRACTICES AT COIMBRA GROUP UNIVERSITIES IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19

May 2020



A Collective Reflection on
the Present and Future of
Higher Education in
Europe

This report is available in PDF format at <https://www.coimbra-group.eu/cg-publications/>

Acknowledgments:

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Foreword

Since the very first days of the COVID-19 crisis, the Coimbra Group Executive Board has been reflecting on how we could transform this unprecedented situation into an opportunity for our network, as we have always done in the past, for sharing good practices in managing such an extraordinary crisis. This reflection has started with the help of the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the Working Groups on Academic Exchange and Mobility, Education Innovation, Doctoral Studies and Research Support Officers. This discussion allowed us to respond immediately to a request from the European Commission on 20 March 2020 about the most urgent measures to be taken regarding the crisis management in the context of the repatriation of students and staff on mobility, and also with respect to the application of the “force majeure” clause of the Erasmus+ programme: this led to the [first Coimbra Group briefing paper on Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education](#).

This reflection was soon extended to all Working Groups and member universities, through a comprehensive online questionnaire addressing all aspects of academic missions sent to Coimbra Group Universities in early April 2020. The responses from 33 Coimbra Group Universities have been collected within two weeks and are now published in this second Coimbra Group study paper on Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education and Research.

This in-depth study will enrich our collegial dialogue, might assist member universities in their own crisis management through the sharing of experiences and ideas and should also help in the definition of relevant practical and policy guidelines for the Higher Education and Research systems overall.

Members of the Coimbra Group as well as Chairs, Vice-Chairs and participants of the Working Groups are warmly acknowledged for this unprecedented demonstration of agility and commitment despite all other constraints imposed by the COVID-19 crisis.

The members of the Coimbra Group Executive Board,

Prof. Ludovic Thilly, Executive Board Chair

Prof. Jürgen Barkhoff, Executive Board Vice-Chair

Prof. Luca Verzichelli, Treasurer

Prof. Cláudia Cavadas

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 outbreak is posing enormous challenges to universities and the delivery of education and research. However, on a positive note, it has accelerated changes that were gradually beginning to take place. At the time of writing, uncertainty on the lifting of restrictions on movement and on social distancing protocols make it impossible to predict the medium and long-term implications of the crisis. Following the launch of an online questionnaire across the 40 Coimbra Group constituent universities and several internal brainstorming sessions in early April 2020, what stands out is the agility of universities' response to the unexpected and sudden challenges and their flexibility in terms of adjustment of practice. At this stage into the COVID-19 crisis, this report is a collective reflection garnered from practitioners and academics from across our member universities and has drawn out the following key takeaway messages:

Key takeaways for universities:

- Given the likelihood of online learning continuing into at least part of the next academic year, universities could use this opportunity to reflect and elaborate on renewed models of internationalisation at home. It is important that this process involves the entire higher education community: top management, academic and administrative staff and students.
- The pivot to online delivery of education cannot be sustained in the long-term because the vast majority of courses currently on offer were pedagogically designed to be delivered face-to-face. This COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity to reflect on good practice for the design of online and blended courses and the challenges that this process entails in protecting learning outcomes for students. An important investment in terms of financial and human resources will be needed.
- Universities can take advantage of this opportunity to implement changes to academic procedures and update existing, possibly outdated, regulations and protocols.
- University leaders and university associations could track and demonstrate how important and multi-faceted is the universities' contribution on society during the pandemic and disseminate these findings to national and international policy-makers for consideration for future policies and support mechanisms.

Key takeaways for policy-makers and funders:

- Funding should be made available for research into the evaluation of the impact of COVID-19 on higher education, in terms of international collaboration, teaching and learning, research and innovation and internationalisation.
- The European Commission has a critical role to play in this and future crises, supporting universities not only in the activities funded within framework programmes, but also in trying to harmonise national responses to a crisis.
- It would be helpful to have a more systematic dissemination of the outcomes, results, resources and tools developed in EU projects funded over many years

and related to all the issues with which universities have been struggling over the past two months.

- Funds originally intended for physical mobility could be redirected to other uses, such as the development of “internationalisation at home” strategies and initiatives within and across institutions and cooperation projects of all kinds to help quality implementation of on-line teaching & learning, assessment and their quality assurance. Funding could be made available for the technological equipment needed to maintain strong reliable platforms for on-line teaching and learning.
- Instead of applying standard instruments and rules, the European Commission could offer blanket solutions which would be simpler to apply for all concerned: universities, students, staff and researchers, national agencies, the EACEA and the Commission itself. For example, a blanket 6 month extension for all projects and grant agreements underway.
- The value of research and innovation in addressing global challenges and its contribution to economic activity should be recognised and investment in research and innovation should be increased accordingly.
- Further investment would be needed in strategies that support the mission of public universities and the development and support of their staff so that they are equipped to provide students with learning experiences and forms of assessment that are equitable, fair, accessible and relevant to their specific contexts - even in crisis situations.

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Introduction

As the spread of COVID-19 across Europe escalated through February and March 2020, European governments responded by imposing various restrictions aimed at hindering the spread of the virus. In almost all of the countries of Coimbra Group universities these restrictions resulted in the closure of our university campuses. The spread of COVID-19 and the measures adopted to face this pandemic are having – and will continue to have – implications on many aspects of higher education including international mobility, teaching and learning, research and doctoral studies.

This report is the result of a perceived need to exchange experiences and practices in facing this unprecedented time in higher education. What Coimbra Group member universities have in common is their long-established, multidisciplinary nature and high international standards in research, teaching and learning as well as student and staff mobility. They also share a history of collaboration and rich mutual exchange deriving from the diversity of national and academic contexts in which they are situated and can bring together.

The report brings together the results of a survey with open questions developed by the Coimbra Group Office and the Chairs and Vice-chairs of four working groups (WG): Academic Exchange and Mobility, Education Innovation, Doctoral Studies and Research Support Officers and the coordinator of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership project [UNISAFE](#). The aim of the survey was to seek feedback on how the COVID-19 crisis is affecting and is expected to affect universities in the short-, medium- and long-term.

The questionnaire was divided into four sections regarding different areas:

Part I: Student/Staff Mobility

Part II: Teaching and Learning

Part III: Doctoral and Research Activities

Part IV: Transversal issues

The Coimbra Group sent the online survey to its 40 members in April 2020. The survey was sent to each member university's Coimbra Group representative, as well as to the chairs of the working groups on 8 April. The deadline for responses was originally set for 17 April, but was then extended to 22 April. Responses were received from 33 universities. The responses were then analysed and discussed by the working groups who wrote the different sections of this report.

Besides the survey, Coimbra Group Working Groups discussed these issues also at several online meetings set up during the lockdown. The Working Group Chairs and Vice-chairs and the UNISAFE project consortium were responsible for drafting a thematic brief for each area. The Coimbra Group Office consolidated these into an overview report integrating the thematic briefs as well as a section on transversal issues.

This report can only provide a snapshot of the situation at the time of writing (April 2020) in a range of diverse contexts, it is not an analysis or evaluation of the policies and practices being put in place. This, we hope, will come in the near future. It is divided into five sections outlining the experiences and responses of Coimbra Group universities during the COVID-19 emergency in the following areas:

- Student and Staff Mobility
- Teaching and Learning

- Research and Innovation
- Doctoral Studies
- The contribution of universities to the global response

These five sections present each a different layout and can be read as stand-alone papers. The section *“Looking to the Future”*, builds on the findings from the previous sections as the basis for a collective reflection on the present and future of higher education and research.

It is important to keep in mind, of course, that there are considerable differences in national higher education systems in Europe with divergent degree structures and academic traditions which affect how courses are taught and assessed. There are also national and institutional differences in terms of staff and student numbers, international students and academics, funding mechanisms, availability of continuous professional development and support structures for teaching and learning, both online and offline. These inevitably have an impact on the strategies adopted.

Throughout the report there are several examples of practices at Coimbra Group universities in response to the pandemic. It would be challenging to cite all the numerous initiatives going on; the non-exhaustive list provided here is intended to illustrate rather the types and variety of activities.

1. Student and Staff Mobility

By Dorota Maciejowska (Jagiellonian University in Krakow), Chair of the Coimbra Group Academic Exchange and Mobility Working Group and Tiziana Gatti (University of Siena), Vice-Chair of the Coimbra Group Academic Exchange and Mobility Working Group

The COVID-19 emergency outbreak has had a strong impact on the academic mobility of students and staff.

Given the quick decision-making required, the mobility issue has received special attention in this new and complex situation.

The pandemic hit Europe during the months of February and March, the latter coinciding, at most European universities, with the beginning of the second semester of the academic year, when the large majority of mobile students had already reached their host university and started attending courses or their internship period abroad.

The universities of the Coimbra Group encompass approximately 20% of the total number of mobile students at a European level: this implies that there was a large population who immediately needed assistance and information, both from their home and host universities. The most stressful period, in this respect, occurred between mid-March and mid-April 2020.

The International Relations Offices (IRO) at the Coimbra Group universities had to react promptly in order to understand the complex situation related to mobility. They had to find the best solutions to a number of different problems which suddenly affected both guest students and staff, as well as home students and staff who were on an exchange abroad.

The policies and practices implemented at Coimbra Group universities in response to the crisis will be described in the following section. These policies and practices vary according to the measures taken by the corresponding national authorities of each country. The most important and urgent issue was of course to guarantee the safety and wellbeing of all individuals.

Within the Coimbra Group universities, the Academic and Exchange Mobility Working Group was already addressing the topic of safety (see: [Guidebook for Coimbra Group Universities on safety protocols for mobility](#): quoted in the official document of the European Commission regarding the new [Erasmus+ Charter for 2021-2027 \(page 19\)](#)). This enabled IRO staff to handle the situation competently and efficiently, in spite of the unexpected and problematic context along with the extra challenge of working remotely.

Considering the overall negative context, this was a positive outcome, which was undoubtedly possible thanks to the involvement of the whole university community: rectors, vice rectors, academic and administrative staff. Prompt and effective collaboration at every level within the universities brought, and continues to bring, new approaches and alternative opportunities in the field of international mobility.

1.1 Insights on Policies and Practices at Coimbra Group Universities

Considering that the institutions responding to the survey are located in different parts of Europe, the patterns identified in the responses confirm that all the constituent universities of the Coimbra Group have been experiencing uncertainty and fear. We have all been facing the same problems and we were all unprepared for this unexpected situation. The universities'

first and immediate reaction has been to ensure the continuity of education, which is now offered online. Coimbra Group universities were asked to answer the following questions. The responses provided indicate that the priority now is to maintain and restore mobility in order to continue the intercultural exchange developed over the years.

I. How does your university keep in touch with students and staff abroad and keep them updated on changing travel advice and restrictions?

Communication with students abroad has never been more important since the COVID-19 outbreak. All Coimbra Group universities have maintained constant contact with their students abroad. Queries were mainly related to return-home procedures and travel advice, financial measures, updates on decisions undertaken by the national and university authorities, as well as advice on specific problems encountered by individual students and staff. Universities were obliged to support students and staff in facing the emergency situation, both financially and academically, and in compliance with the recommendations from the European Commission and the Erasmus+ National Agencies.

Various communication channels have been used. All Coimbra Group universities report having used e-mail, phone (also emergency phone lines), websites devoted to the COVID-19 emergency and social media (WhatsApp, Skype, Facebook, Twitter). Some of them used university applications and other tools (i.e. tutorial platforms, TEAMS platform) where the students could receive information and talk directly to the authorities. Regular zoom meetings were also conducted as well as online surveys collecting information on students' and/or staff's plans regarding their return home, the problems they encountered, regular up-to-date health advice and the appropriate guidance during this critical time. Generally, in all Coimbra Group universities the IROs have been the entity responsible for direct communication with students.

II. What are the main difficulties related to the assistance provided to outgoing and incoming mobility of students/researchers/staff and how are they been addressed? What support is being provided to international students who remained in your city or university student accommodation?

Coimbra Group universities have closely monitored their international students and staff and, as much as possible, have provided assistance and advice on any incident that may have arisen (housing, insurance, learning, health issues, etc.). In some cases, it has been challenging to maintain contact with students due to delay in or lack of response. "Free movers" have sometimes also been unreachable.

The difficulty also lay in the rapidly changing situation and the need for coordination between several actors (universities, ministries, Erasmus+ National Agencies and others).

Coimbra Group universities reported that the most frequent challenges related to students and staff abroad as well as incoming students were:

- Travel restrictions that were adopted in the second half of March 2020 following the cancellation of almost all flights and closing of the majority of borders;
- The obligation to transfer study plans online at host university or at home university. Online teaching and learning appears to have been a challenge for all academic and administrative staff as well as students;
- The closing of halls of residence and the requests for help to return home;

- Students being concerned about the safety precautions taken by host universities, fearing becoming ill, and uncertain about how to proceed in such circumstances;
- The insufficient manpower to support students in mobility. Staff from other university units have had to help out;
- The difficulty to predict what would happen, especially in the first phase of the emergency (as it is a constantly evolving crisis);
- Keeping students up to date by providing information on topics not strictly related to the university (e.g. language barriers when accessing healthcare services and/or residence permit restrictions).

Below are some examples of actions undertaken at Coimbra Group universities:

- Booking of rooms throughout the city for incoming students in quarantine;
- Engagement of private travel agencies to help students solve travel issues;
- Launch of special mobile phone lines for international students who might need health assistance;
- Simplification of procedures related to accommodation rental, sometimes reimbursement of housing deposits;
- Calls for donation for students in need, which resulted in 120 emergency scholarships offered to international students;
- Distribution of face masks to students;
- Online sessions organized by the student union where exchange students are able to ask questions and receive assistance;
- Daily drop-in zoom meetings with IRO staff.

The following structural solutions are also worth mentioning:

- Commitment from all university service units to operate remotely. Support is provided by authorities, international offices, study advisors, student deans, Erasmus Student Network local sections, international student mentors/buddies, etc.;
- Psychological counselling organized for those who wish to receive it. In some cases, Master's students in psychology and their mentors were engaged, or it was offered by professional units like Student Centres for Support and Adaptation;
- Possibility to attend lessons and follow exams at the home institution for students who did not have the option to attend online courses at the host institution;
- University funds used to support international students in need, especially those who held part-time jobs during their studies/internships.

III. What is the role of the International Relations Office (IRO) in providing support and at institutional level? Was an emergency team created?

The majority of universities appear to have set up centralized institutional emergency teams whose members are university authorities, directors of central units and sometimes medical doctors as advisors. In some cases, these teams already existed as regular crisis management teams. However, in most cases, they have been established specifically because of the COVID-19 outbreak. The IROs are members of these teams and play a prominent role in dealing with outgoing/incoming students and staff. Frequently, central IROs communicate with international officers at faculties and with other relevant units.

IV. Are you receiving support from your Erasmus+ National Agency in a timely and efficiently manner for all KA actions? Is this coordinated with the relevant ministries?

Erasmus+ National Agencies (NA) operate differently from country to country when it comes to dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak. Some of the NAs have strongly and rapidly supported universities (in Finland weekly webinars were organized). In other cases, however, their support has been lagging behind (in Italy no webinars were set up to train people on the new procedures) and created additional administrative procedures (i.e. too many documents of proof requested from students as well as additional signatures of legal representatives of the university).

This situation can be partially considered as the result of the flexibility conceded to NAs by the European Commission. More specifically, the NAs played a role in offering support with regard to procedures related to the *force majeure* clause. The Finnish NA is the best example, as it took on all the bureaucratic formalities related to the Erasmus+ students affected by the COVID-19 outbreak and has been very flexible with regard to the recognition of the mobility period and costs incurred by participants. Coimbra Group universities recommend a common interpretation of the European Commission's guidelines by NAs.

Usually NAs cooperate with ministries or national rectors' conferences, which makes the coordination of activities and decisions at national level more homogeneous. Nevertheless, the Coimbra Group universities had to resort to their strategic networks to obtain a proactive response from the NAs and the European Commission.

V. What practices and lessons learnt could be useful to share with other universities at this stage?

The sudden lockdown and implementation of restrictive measures required a quick response from the higher education community, which established novel procedures at very short notice. Universities have learnt that they should always be prepared for the unexpected. This crisis has revealed how important it is to be ready to react promptly and have the ability to adapt to constantly changing situations. At the very early stage of the outbreak, the preventive responses of some universities were not positively received by the higher education community in different parts of Europe. This was the case for the early travel bans, which were interpreted as being discriminatory towards international students.

We have also learnt that our institutions need emergency procedures in place that can be activated immediately when required. The [UNISAFE](#) project, which is run by several Coimbra Group universities with funding from the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships action, provides a good example of emergency protocols and tools for higher education institutions.

Following the experience so far, we have the following recommendations:

- Maintain an agile organization;
- Make the best possible decisions and be prepared to revise them if they are not appropriate;
- When it comes to people, act quickly. When it comes to administrative regulations, act slower, as the information tends to change from one week to the next. Stay calm, just try to be as informative as possible with the scarce information you have at hand.

1.2 Examples of practices implemented at CG Universities in response to the COVID-19 emergency

These quotes illustrate the types of initiatives identified (the list is not exhaustive).

I. Supporting students with travel solutions:

“The University of Bologna has provided students with the support of a private travel agency in order to help them find the best possible travel solutions to get back home also in contact with Italian consulates and embassies.” **University of Bologna**

II. Supporting students with individual problems:

“We did a survey and analyze the reported problems on a case by case basis in cooperation with Faculties.” **University of Coimbra**

III. Supporting students with accommodation:

“There have been reserved several rooms throughout the city for students who have to be put into quarantine, organized by the Faculty of Medicine.” **University of Cologne**

“Incoming students who wanted to leave early have been given the possibility to break the rent with only one month of penalty, instead of three. Incoming students who left in a hurry could break the rent by digital means and get their stuff packed and stored. Incoming students who are staying are treated like all regular students.” **University of Geneva**

“A number of extra rooms are available, in case of need (in some cases, students have moved to a different room just to feel safe).” **Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași**

“For students who left and wanted to cancel their rental agreement, the procedure was simplified and a central point of contact was established. This same central contact point was used for home students abroad who had questions on repatriation etc.” **University of Groningen**

IV. Crisis management:

“Our university crisis management team meets once a week, the crisis management leadership daily and there is regular communication with the city administration, the university hospital and the Göttingen Association of Student Services.” **University of Göttingen**

“We're now working on a Risk Mitigation Strategy for the months to come and we suggest that also other universities could do the same.” **University of Padova**

“Università degli Studi di Pavia still has to implement a protocol for the security of its students. Actually there is an ongoing project (UNISAFE) that will allow it but it is still at an initial stage. The present situation reveals to be a great case study to progress in it and create shared common guidelines at this regard.” **University of Pavia**

“There is a permanent connection among university authorities, regional authorities and national ones (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Foreign Affairs) through the Spanish National Rectors Conference and all of them are trying to give support to students and professors with special difficulties to return to Spain.” **University of Salamanca**

V. Financial support to students:

“Our main concern is that many international students who were funding their studies through part-time jobs are now facing financial hardship. We are using various funds from the university, student association and fundraising among alumni to alleviate financial hardship (amounting to 17.000 Euro in total).” **University of Göttingen**

“The University launched a [call for donations](#) for students in need and granted more than 120 emergency scholarships to international students.” **University of Jena**

VI. Sharing good practice with international partners:

“The current crisis showed us how well-connected universities are on a national and international level and how important it is to share best practices and exchange experience. One example is the exchange of ideas in the Coimbra Group AEM Working Group during a virtual meeting on April 15, 2020. It showed that the National Agencies act differently from country to country when it comes to dealing with force majeure cases and it was agreed to report to the Commission how important a unified interpretation of the EU Commission's guidelines is.” **University of Graz**

VII. Efficient communication:

“The University Administration organizes online conferences which are coordinated with Istanbul Provincial Health Directorate for students and academic-administrative staff to raise awareness of the risks and to be protected from the virus.” **Istanbul University**

“We prepared several surveys in which they (students) can also let us know whether they need any assistance while staying abroad or in Kraków. (...) Afterwards, we have provided them support tailored to their specific needs. Students who are residing in JU dorms have been given the possibility of extending their period of accommodation.” **Jagiellonian University in Krakow**

“At the end of March, a survey was sent to the outgoing students (both those already come

back and those continuing their stay abroad) to gather all the information in a more systematical way and to know about specific problems or costs they had faced.” **University of Siena**

“To help students and teachers in this challenging times, SPbU created tutorials on the most popular platforms for distance learning on <https://online.spbu.ru>. Incoming and outgoing students’ activities are administrated by International Academic Cooperation department as usual, but in an online format.” **Saint Petersburg State University**

VIII. Psychological support:

“International students and staff who decided to stay in Kraków are also supported by the Rector’s Proxy for Students Safety and Security, Student Centre for Support and Adaptation "SOWA".” **Jagiellonian University in Krakow**

“In addition to the existing psychology support unit, a dedicated team has been set up.” **University of Montpellier**

IX. Engagement of student community:

“Our ESN section is also very active and is promoting online recreational activities, while the University has developed a brand new website entirely devoted to the situation: <https://web.unipd.it/stayhome/>.” **University of Padova**

“Moreover, student volunteers go around all the university residences, once a week, to meet with these students and report on eventual problems. What started as a geographical issue (i.e. start of the epidemic in China then spread to Italy) quickly became a global one, with impact on all academic missions.” **University of Poitiers**

“As to the Erasmus programme, our student volunteers from the ESN network made fabric face masks for part of our incoming Erasmus students and we also bought reusable face masks for the rest of them plus provided instructions how to made them – as it has been obligatory in the Czech Republic to wear a face mask ever since the start of State of Emergency in March.” **Charles University in Prague**

X. Networks and online courses:

“There has been some virtual mobility. We are member of UArctic network and they offer Circumpolar Studies online. In addition, Baltic University Program offers online courses, which can also be included in intensive courses. Then we have been involved in the projects within Coimbra Group: Enterprise-University Virtual Placements and the [VICTORIOUS](#) project.” **University of Turku**

1.3 Mobility during COVID-19 outbreak (in numbers)

As mentioned in the [First Coimbra Group briefing paper on Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education](#) released on 20 March, in the early phase of the crisis our universities have dealt with urgent needs regarding rapid repatriation of students and staff on mobility within and outside Europe.

Table 1 (see Annex 2) provides an overview of the mean numbers of incoming (698) and outgoing (582) students and staff at respondent Coimbra Group universities who were in mobility during COVID-19 outbreak.

The table also informs on the proportion of incoming (71,3%) and outgoing (66,5%) students continuing their mobility virtually and of the percentage of universities with previous experience in virtual exchanges (50%).

A breakdown by university is also provided in Table 2.

1.4 Key Takeaways for the Higher Education Community

The coronavirus crisis has particularly impacted international cooperation and mobility. However, in spite of the forced isolation and national borders closing down, we have remained in permanent contact with our partner universities across Europe. Furthermore, we have understood that together we are much stronger in facing the crisis. We are always ready to support each other, share good practice and react jointly against difficulties. There have been no real borders when it comes to solidarity, friendship and willingness to continue our global partnership.

We are concerned that mobilities may suffer funding cuts in the future EU budgets owing to the necessity to deal with the economic recovery from the Coronavirus crisis. In addition to that, many families will likely have fewer financial resources to be able to afford mobility. We are concerned that it will take years to reach the mobility levels we were proud to have achieved. However, we believe that the crisis will also make us focus more on the quality of mobility. Our contacts will be more conscious, well planned and even more reasonable. We will benefit from harnessing the full potential of online resources, but we will also strive to maintain our inspiring face-to-face contacts.

The role of international networks such as the Coimbra Group will be crucial in overcoming of the breakdown of international mobility. In the near future, we will probably need to revise our mobility schemes and try to develop exchange programmes, including virtual and blended mobility, which will be more achievable from a financial perspective. Our Coimbra Group Student Exchange Network can be a great framework for further development of student and staff exchange.

To end on a positive note, the figures in the tables 1 and 2 (see Annex 2) show that, even though a large amount of mobility has been discontinued, around 70% of Coimbra Group students have been able to continue their mobility virtually. This demonstrates that universities have the ability to create a free area of virtual mobility for our students.

2. Teaching and Learning

By Dr Francesca Helm (University of Padova), Chair of the Coimbra Group Education Innovation Working Group and Prof. Dr Nicoleta Popa (Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași), Vice-Chair of the Coimbra Group Education Innovation Working Group

Teaching and learning has been dramatically affected by the COVID-19 virus, as universities across Europe (and the globe) have had to close their classrooms and very quickly 'pivot' to what has been defined as 'emergency remote teaching'. By 'emergency remote teaching' we mean streaming of lectures and using technology to replicate classroom lectures rather than planned online learning, that is courses conceived and built with virtual delivery from the outset, using consistent course design and deeply integrated student support, and delivered by instructors with meaningful training in online pedagogy.

In this short report we seek to provide an overview of the policies and practices that some Coimbra Group universities have put in place to face the challenges that this sudden change has inevitably brought about. This overview of responses to the survey is followed by a final section with reflections of the Education Innovation Working Group, which brings together educators, professional development and e-learning staff, researchers in education and vice-deans of education from a large number of Coimbra Group universities.

Transition took place at different times - Italy was the first European country where the virus struck and universities closed to students at the end of February, which according to the academic calendar is the winter exam session and also graduation time for some students. The spring semester started remotely at the beginning of March. In many other countries the transition to remote teaching took place in mid or late March, and this was the middle or nearly end of the semester. In Turkey the transition was finalised at the beginning of April, in Germany remote teaching started mid April - so at the moment of responding to the survey the pivot had just started. At the time of writing (end of April) some universities have never closed to students and teaching staff (for example Sweden), though teaching is remote, others have been closed for several months. Some institutions have already developed strategies and regulations, others are still in the process.

2.1 Insights on policies and practices

I. Transition to remote emergency teaching

All universities have pivoted to remote emergency teaching and learning - some report that practically all courses have made this transition, some report that a reduced number of courses are currently on offer - due to the cancelling or postponing some classes or a shorter teaching semester.

Most universities quickly provided a single webpage where information is provided to students and educators about teaching and learning in times of COVID-19. No university reported having a strategy already in place to face such a situation before the pandemic.

The **University of Padova** was one of the first Coimbra Group universities struck as Padova was identified as a 'red zone' at the end of February. Exams and theses were suspended from the 24-29th February but from 2nd March exams and theses discussions resumed online, and the second semester started with only one week delay on 9th March.

The most common approaches to remote emergency teaching reported by institutions are:

- Live streaming (and recording) of lectures and classes which stick to original timetables for face to face lessons.
- Pre-recording of lectures and posting them on the institution's Learning Management Systems
- Posting of materials on the Learning Management Systems

II. Centralization of services/support

In most universities a central task force or working group has been set up at the level of the vice-rectorate for teaching and learning also because the situation has meant that changes have had to be made to teaching & learning regulations. Some universities also reported coordination, guidelines and/or support on a national and/or regional level.

The task forces generally include the IT or eLearning centres, centres for professional development and/or education department and have regular meetings (often beginning on a daily basis, now weekly).

Universities that were more able to adapt quickly to the current situation because of the existing practices and resources they already had in place. In these cases it was more an issue of scaling up existing practices that were quite widespread across the institution such as strong professional development programmes for teaching staff, academic support staff, alternative forms of assessment and a focus on learning.

The **University of Turku** has a Digi-peda team (app. 20 people in central administration) who in normal situations is responsible for arranging support in teaching and learning affairs for teachers. This team has been the central actor to support and help teachers to adapt into this different situation.

Some universities have 'frontrunners' or 'change agents', that is teaching staff experienced and/or interested in online teaching and learning in each faculty/department who are interested in online teaching and learning who participate in regular meetings with central coordination and facilitate the sharing of good practices and also challenges faced within and across the faculties/departments.

Almost all universities reported having one or more institutional learning management systems (LMS) already in place (the most commonly cited are Moodle, Blackboard and Canvas, some institutions have their own LMS, for example the University of Pavia, and University of Granada). This is usually integrated with or supported by other tools for example those used for live classes (such as Teams, Collaborate, Zoom), also tools for recording, editing and posting lectures (Kaltura, Camtasia). In some cases new tools have been acquired by the institution, in particular tools for video conferencing. Some institutions reported having online courses and MOOCs on platforms such as Open Education and Coursera which they made available to students.

III. Main challenges reported

The main challenge at the beginning was the short time for the pivot. There was considerable variety in the time required for this. In some cases it took place over a

weekend, in others there was a one-week break and others took 2-3 weeks and delayed the start of the semester.

Many institutions reported that initially there were problems with tools and the capacity of the technologies used, some of which had short outages in early stages because of the high levels of global demand. However most were able to address these challenges in a relatively short time.

A further issue reported is that not all students have (unlimited) access to computers and quality broadband. Quality broadband is also an issue for some teaching staff. Furthermore some international students have returned home to countries where access to foreign information sources and internet tools in certain jurisdictions is limited, restricted or blocked (eg. in China)

Several universities reported that some teaching staff are struggling with the challenges of adapting to remote emergency teaching, family obligations (childcare, homeschooling, ...).

The present situation is also challenging for teaching staff due to the increased workload it has placed on them, they are often the first contact point for students, needing to provide technical, academic and personal support for many students, often on a one-to-one level.

IV. Support for teaching staff

Universities have been providing additional support for teaching staff in the pivot to remote emergency teaching. Many universities have a team of learning designers/academic counsellors/e-mentors/learning engineers who provide support to teaching staff in designing blended courses. Provision of in-house courses and support has increased exponentially at all universities that responded to the survey.

- User-guides to online teaching and tools for teachers are published on the university intranet or on a webpage (in the national language and in English in some cases)
- Guides for teaching staff on adapting online teaching to different situations and to students with specific needs
- Webinars to support the use of digital tools - in some cases on a daily basis
- Webinars and zoom meetings about pedagogic issues
- A telephone hotline or email support - in some cases open 7 days a week where staff can write for support

At the **University of Geneva** teaching staff are supported through webinars on distance learning pedagogy and 'Virtual Afterwork sessions' on distance learning to share good practices among colleagues.

The **University of Würzburg** has encouraged online staff development also through the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange. The virtual Exchange approach is being implemented in the Profilehre certificate program in cooperation with Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange and through their own accompanying consulting our coaching formats. The Career Centre is also following training and offering Virtual Exchange opportunities to students to develop international and online employability skills.

Many universities also report on libraries making more services and resources accessible remotely, increasing e-books available, and the making of some online resources temporarily freely available by some publishers.

The **University of Poitiers** reports that in the field of STEM many resources to teach online were already available, and some contents have been made available online by scientific publishers

The Vice Rector for Education at the **University of Bergen** has announced extra funding for teachers who would like to do research on their changes in teaching and learning (SoTL projects).

The **Jagiellonian University in Krakow** is adjusting the focus of course evaluations so they focus not on teachers' performance per se but to benefit from feedback about the online teaching/learning experience in order to prepare the academic community for inevitable future of educational and technological challenges

V. Support for students

Students are reported to be facing difficulties on financial, academic and also social and psychological levels. Not all students have computers and good levels of broadband, some can only access through smartphones, or at certain times of day, some students face firewall restrictions depending on where they are connecting from. Also access to spaces where they can connect and study in their homes is a challenge for some students. Support measures include:

- Hardship funding schemes, additional financial aid programmes specifically for crisis, in some cases with the support of external organizations
- Extension of payment deadlines or exemption of fees for some students
- Temporary suspension of studies
- Provision of laptops or tablets to students who do not have access to computers at home through grants or co-financing to buy them, or on loan schemes
- Provision of SIM cards for students with no internet connections

At the **University of Granada** special grants are being offered to students with special needs (for instance, with no internet connection); a computer loan service has been set up for both students and staff with difficulties and SIM cards have been distributed to those experiencing financial hardship to ensure sufficient access for on-line learning. Similarly, tutors monitoring students with special educational needs have intensified their programmes.

To support students in the transition to remote teaching and learning

- Online support meetings for students with special needs.
- Guides on how to use specific tools and exam software and procedures
- Guides to online learning strategies and studying for students
- Tutorials for students on distance working, advice in organization of time
- Extending deadlines for submission of essays and course work

NUI Galway has a [short course](#) for students on effective learning online.

The **University of Poitiers** reports making webapps available for students to collaborate on group projects.

To support the social side and community amongst students

- Forums for students to exchange practice and study tips
- Facebook page
- Chatlines for student welfare

At **Åbo Akademi University** some subject areas have organized digital coffee rooms for the students.

Psychological support is also available. Most universities report making existing psychological services available by telephone, Skype or Zoom. Several universities report having put in place additional psychological support services specifically to address anxiety related to COVID-19, for example through a dedicated hotline.

The student community's direct voice does not appear in this report, how they have reacted to this pivot, the extent to which they feel their learning and wellbeing has been affected by the pivot to remote teaching. Several universities have reported that they will be sending surveys to students and/or teaching staff in the near future.

Uppsala University is currently performing a [short survey](#) concerning the transition to digital distance education due to the current COVID-19 pandemic. The questions are broad and generally formulated to give an overall picture of students' experiences of the new teaching situation. The results will form the basis for quality development and an in-depth study that is planned to be carried out in the autumn of 2020.

VI. Assessment

This is the area around which there is most uncertainty and what many universities are grappling with at the moment of writing as the current situation requires modifications in regulations for many universities. Several universities were still in the process of drawing up guidelines at the time the survey was distributed.

Here several factors come into play: academic 'cultures', disciplinary area, number of students, national guidelines/regulations, university governance, professional accreditation requirements. In some cases strict indications are coming from the central administration, in other cases it is up to the teaching staff how to assess students. This is particularly challenging for universities and courses with large numbers of students. Also in difficulty are fields where teaching cannot be transferred easily to digital platforms, where fieldwork or labwork is required or access to materials that are not accessible.

The **University of Pavia** has created virtual simulators to allow students of the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery to do online exercises

Some universities have for several years been engaging with **formative and continuous assessment** (see the [Coimbra Group White Paper on current trends on assessment in Europe](#)) as well as alternatives to the timed final written exam, for example open book exams.

Some universities have reported giving teaching staff specific indications, for example:

- Each subject has to have at least 3 different ways of assessing students

At **Durham University**, all exams have to be 'take-away exams, whereby students have 48 hours to complete the exam to accommodate for time zone differences, disability and religious observances without further adjustment. Departments will be provided with info about academic achievements over the past 3 years and will use normal processes in the power of Boards of Examiners to ensure standards are comparable

Others are making 'recommendations' to lecturers, for example:

- Avoiding supervised written exams as much as possible
- Replacement of supervised written exams with assignments, open book exams, digital portfolios or project work where possible
- Shifting exams where possible to oral mode
- Exploring the potential for alternative modes of assessment and supporting teaching staff in this. Support is being provided in the form of guides and webinars on preparing open book exams, or designing exam questions.

At the **University of Bergen** 70 % of written exams were already digital before the COVID-19 crisis. However it was recognised that the transition from campus to home exams would require changes to assessment. The University Learning Lab - run webinars 3 times a week on Good pedagogical practice in online teaching and assessment. They have also produced a [guide for teaching staff](#) to guide them in redesigning assessment.

It is widely recognised that supervised written exams are best avoided if possible. When unavoidable universities are introducing security measures which include using webcams and Zoom for 'surveillance' and administrative staff 'invigilating'; some are exploring 'proctoring' services.

Some universities may have on-site supervised exams for subjects where this is necessary and are working on how to put into place the security measures. Thesis discussions are being held or planned to be held online.

Istanbul University's main challenge is related to one of its strengths: its large capacity. This also raises the question of the most feasible assessment and evaluation system for the students. For the midterms the University Administration approved of assigning coursework. The decision of final exams is yet to be taken.

The **University of Granada** reports that e-proctoring is seen as a controversial issue which, technological considerations apart, has met with considerable rejection from student bodies.

In several universities **measures to support students** regarding assessment are being put in place in recognition of the challenges they are currently facing. These include:

- Extensions of deadlines for handing in course work
- Shift from graded exams to pass/fail for some courses - following request from the students in some universities
- If students do not obtain credits for given courses, the fail will not count as an attempt and study completion deadlines will be extended
- Deferral (to reassessment session but considered as first attempt) and retrospective deferral (that is students who attempt assessments but find that they

are not able to perform as expected can also apply for a deferral to the reassessment session)

- Training in use of online tools to be used for assessment

At **Trinity College Dublin**, the University Council has approved the use of two extra contingency weeks for assessment. A mitigation plan is now in place and it covers issues such as deferral, retrospective deferral, giving boards of examiners discretionary power, permission for students to resit passed modules, identification of modules taken during COVID-19 in student transcripts.

Charles University in Prague has decided to go even further with its own regulations entitled Special Rules of Study at Charles University: students whose maximum period of study should expire between the beginning of the emergency and the end of the calendar year 2020 will have until the end of 2021 to complete their studies. This maximum extension is automatic.

VII. Internships and placements

The majority of universities have said that placements have been cancelled, suspended or postponed, when it is not possible for students to continue their placements online in some way. Several universities are approving guidelines for the evaluation of external curricular academic placements that have been started but not completed. Several universities report students of Medicine doing placements in hospitals or health departments to support COVID-19.

A few universities have reported some alternative activities which can partially or completely replace curricular internships, though this is easier for some fields than others:

- Online meetings and talks with professionals
- Online courses offered through careers/employability offices related to developing workplace and transversal skills, job-seeking..
- Analyses of previous video-recordings in real professional settings
- Online training courses offered by organizations
- Project work

The **University of Bologna** has established that new internship proposals must provide descriptions of both remote and face to face activities in order to be approved

The **Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași** has proposed alternative online activities for student placements such as analyses of video recordings made in professional settings, talks with professionals.

A total of almost 700 students, mainly from the Department of Human Medicine at the **University of Cologne**, are providing support during the COVID-19 pandemic, most of them in clinics, hospitals and the municipal health department. In addition, the student council of Human Medicine has established a local network in order to place students, who are willing to work and who have not yet been placed, in the University Hospital, the academic teaching hospitals and other institutions.

2.2 Key takeaways for the higher education community

The pivot to emergency remote teaching that universities have put in place these months is not sustainable, it has put a considerable strain on university staff and students who were not prepared for this kind of teaching and learning. Nor can it be considered as exemplary of good practice in sustainable, accessible online learning. However it has provided an opportunity to reflect on teaching and learning within universities as well as the key issue of assessment of student learning.

Many universities in their immediate responses have reported practices that support community building, sharing and exchange of practices amongst teaching staff within their institutions and also across institutions. The current situation has also opened a space for discussion on the role of online and blended teaching and learning in universities. Clearly it is hoped that we will be back in the classroom as soon as possible, but what role will technologies play in education when that happens?

It is generally acknowledged that once the crisis is over, we will not be returning to the same universities, nor indeed to the same world outside. Universities are already taking decisions regarding teaching and learning in the coming year, which will also have implications for the future.

- It is important to analyse and evaluate the preparedness of universities and the quality of the remote teaching solutions that were put in place. There is a need for an “improvement-oriented” reflection, to support planned and better strategies for the future. Education researchers, teaching and support staff and students should be involved in this reflection.
- Equity and integrity issues should be central in considerations regarding both teaching and learning, and decision-making in the future.
- It takes time to design quality online and blended courses and formative and continuous modes of assessment. There are ‘experts’ (learning designers, ‘engineers’, e-mentors, education researchers) and structures (e.g. Centres for academic development, learning labs) that should support these processes within universities. Economic and human resources should be invested in professional development, teaching and academic support staff to ensure quality education.
- Recognise the value and time investment that goes into quality teaching (both online and offline). Provide incentives and rewards for academics that invest in their teaching careers as well as research.
- Put support mechanisms in place for students, in particular those who are most at risk of exclusion.
- Internationalisation at home and internationalisation of the curriculum should be promoted as opportunities for growth and modernisation of teaching. These are available through collaborations and exchange with international partners and networks - both online and offline. Although international collaboration is considered important, many staff do not feel prepared for or supported in this, as the recent [Coimbra Group Benchmarking project](#) found. Invest in strategies and professional development to support this.

- There is a need for safe, flexible learning spaces for the future. We know from a growing body of research and case studies, which the Education Innovation working group has also been gathering, that flexible learning spaces, designed to accommodate activities where digital resources and tools play an important part to both teachers and students, may contribute to active and deep learning.

2.3 Recommendations for policy makers/funders

- It is important that national governments and the European Commission invest in strategies that support the mission of public universities and the development, growth and support of their teaching staff so that universities are equipped to provide students with quality learning experiences and forms of assessment that are equitable, fair, accessible and relevant to their specific contexts - even in situations such as that we are facing today.
- There is a high focus and investment on Artificial Intelligence and technology-driven solutions but not enough attention paid to online pedagogies, the human dimension of teaching and learning online and the needs of teaching staff and students.
- There are risks (student privacy and data, quality and local relevance of teaching and learning) linked to the increasing involvement of the rapidly growing private education technology sector, dominated by large (mainly U.S.) corporations, such as the MOOC providers Coursera (Coursera currently has formal relationships with 16 governments* around the world), publishing houses and software providers.
- Support transnational professional development programmes for university staff that promote the exchange of open educational practices and resources and the development of networked and collaborative programmes.

3. Research and Innovation

By Dr Ann Ryan (NUI Galway), Chair of the Coimbra Group Research Support Officers Working Group and Dr Bevin McGeever (Trinity College Dublin), Vice-Chair of the Coimbra Group Research Support Officers Working Group

As the spread of COVID-19 across Europe escalated throughout the months of February and March, European governments responded in turn by imposing various restrictions aimed at hindering the spread of the virus. In almost all of our member countries, these restrictions resulted in the closure of our university campuses for a period of time. This report sets out the implications of the response to the pandemic for research, as well as the experiences, challenges and solutions of our universities and research communities to the COVID-19 emergency.

The closure of many campuses took place during the peak of the academic period, with Semester 2 teaching activity in full swing. In many countries, the closures took place with almost immediate effect. Notably, in almost all cases, our members report an understandable prioritisation of education and operational matters in the first few weeks of the closure. This resulted in an initial focus on planning for, adapting to, and implementing alternative approaches to online teaching and assessment, and supporting students through the changes. In more recent weeks, our universities have refocused to consider the challenges for research, as well as how best institutions, funders and policy makers can mitigate these impacts in the times ahead.

3.1 The impact of the closure of universities on research

As universities responded to government instructions to close, they faced the challenge of how to apply the expertise of their researchers and innovators to the challenges of the pandemic. In fact, in many member states, the instruction was conflicting: universities must close their campuses; yet, research is a critical and essential activity, and never more so, than at a time of global emergency.

For the most part, the universities across our network responded similarly to the conflicting message. Campuses closed, and so too did research laboratories and staff were instructed to work from home. Many encountered challenges in maintaining productivity from home in an abnormal time, when there are greater caring responsibilities and in some cases, a lack of resources for desk-based work at home. However, in spite of the challenges, researchers remain productive. Remotely, they are working on *home*-desk-based research, data analysis, virtual project meetings and conferences, writing of reports, publications and grant applications, and so forth. An internal survey of researcher productivity in **NUI Galway** revealed that those whose research normally involves bench work have been able to pivot to these remote tasks in the short term, and this finding is reflected across the network.

However, questions remain on the implications should researchers be restricted from lab access for a longer period (e.g. greater than 3 months). The longer any closure period, a greater adverse impact on the productivity on lab-based research is anticipated, whereas researchers in data science, IT, AHSS and public policy cite new opportunities and the ability to continue to deliver on targets as planned, albeit remotely. In addition, many scientists across disciplines have been applying their expertise to advise the public, industry and government

on the crisis remotely, in the time of 'Fake News' and conflicting information, there has been a growing emphasis on seeking out the experts.

It is important to note that differences in home working environments may confound inequality for researchers. For example, there are reports that women are more likely than men to be responsible for childcare and home-schooling during the crisis and anecdotal reports that journals are currently receiving more articles from male authors than female authors. Differences in caring responsibilities and resources between academics may create imbalances that will need consideration, lending even greater importance to equality initiatives in the times ahead.

To safeguard as timely a return as possible to normal research activity in due course, with some variation, Coimbra Group universities have identified permitted essential research activities that continue during the closure. In all cases, mindful of health and safety guidelines, institutions are facilitating access to campus by approved personnel for short periods to undertake critical and essential services. In the **University of Turku**, approved personnel are classified as authorised with 'A' (continuous) or 'B' (occasional) level access. **Trinity College Dublin** has implemented a Smartphone App System called Safezone to assist with ensuring staff safety when on campus. Activities classified as 'essential' by universities such as **Åbo Akademi University** and the **University of Coimbra** include support for the maintenance and welfare of animal and plant facilities, cryogenic stock maintenance, critical support for infrastructure maintenance such as gas, and equipment, among others.

In the vast majority of cases, researchers were instructed to pause campus-based experiments and not to commence new experiments. Exceptions are found in **Uppsala University**, **Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași**, **University of Tartu** and **Istanbul University** where research continues as normal for some Universities, albeit with sanitisation and social distancing protocols. Where universities do have restrictions on research, the notable and common exception across the Coimbra Group is for COVID-19-related research, which can range from work in the Life Sciences to Humanities. Our universities are facilitating such work as long as it takes place in line with government and public health guidelines and regulations. The Coimbra Group network has provided a unique opportunity for universities to share their new practices in access control and authorisation, and new Standard Operating Procedures designed to facilitate working together safely.

More variation is seen across the network in allowances for non-COVID-related research projects. For example, in some cases research is continuing where existing experiments could not be safely wound down, where a study was at an advanced stage or close to conclusion at the time of closure, or where the study involves continuous sampling. In such cases, such as in **Durham University** and the **University of Jena**, a risk assessment of the activity and approval by senior management is frequently required. However, for the most part, time-sensitive research projects have stopped because of the crisis.

A priority as Europe enters 'Phase 2' of the pandemic will be for Universities to determine how to prioritise the return to work of different research projects and fields, which is likely to be staggered. Example projects that could need special consideration include environmental projects that are dependent on seasonal sampling, or projects that will need a longer (6-9 month) lead-in time to return to normal capacity, as can happen in the case of animal/plant work. There are many more examples of time sensitive research projects. Consequently, each university will need to undertake a mapping and prioritisation exercise. Many of our members have reported these efforts are already underway and, in some cases, even completed. The **University of Poitiers** has adapted Tiered Business Continuity Plans to research laboratories and research facilities, and developed a framework for business

continuity in different scenarios. Similar plans applied in a number of our institutions, are an exemplar of how formalised arrangements for access and critical support can be facilitated for different research units/activity. Mitigation efforts are needed also around research projects that are unlikely to be able to resume for some time in their planned form, e.g., research reliant on face to face interviewing or sampling. Invariably, all research projects will need support and flexibility for some time to come.

3.2 Universities are actively involved at the frontline in the global effort against COVID-19

Across our Network, researchers from all disciplines are rapidly applying their expertise to the challenges of the pandemic and COVID-19 Response Clusters have been established in many universities. Universities across Europe are working at the frontline to support national efforts by providing testing facilities and personnel in laboratories, contact tracing centres with personnel, chemicals such as testing reagents and disinfectants as well as PPE equipment such as 3D printed face visors and face mask adjusters. Furthermore, academic staff are providing expertise to the public effort free of charge with the support of their university, consulting on questions ranging from alternatives to current PPE materials to economic forecasting. Moreover, our researchers are designing and mobilising innovative research projects in response to the global emergency. Of note, is the multidisciplinary breadth of this research. It aims to develop evidence-based and innovative solutions, not just to the immediate health and medical challenges presented by the virus itself, but also, to the social, economic, mental health, and cultural challenges arising from the pandemic, as well as to contribute to public debate on related matters.

Many of our universities have dedicated websites that showcase examples of the diverse ways in which research is contributing to the global response to the situation. Among the Coimbra Group there are numerous different initiatives that demonstrate the essential role that Universities are playing, highlighting the importance of these public institutions at a time when many are under threat of an anticipated drop in spend of both private and public bodies, as noted by the European Commission. Many researchers working on COVID-19 research have been able to make significant impacts by leveraging their expertise accrued by pursuing fundamental research, examples are detailed extensively on the [ERC website](#), lending further evidence of the flaws that lie in the deprioritisation of fundamental research and research excellence.

Among the Coimbra Group, some examples of research taking place include:

- *Life Sciences*: the development of diagnostic tests, therapeutics and vaccines, clinical trials, biomolecular investigations of the binding sites and transmission mechanisms of COVID-19, genetic mapping and studying the pathology of this new infection, in some cases these studies involve close collaboration with hospitals
- *Physical Sciences*: adjusting ventilators to serve more than one patient at a time, designing alternative PPE during the shortage, developing contact tracing apps, drug design and formulating new effective disinfectant chemicals and equipment.
- *Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*: investigating the psychological and legal consequences of the pandemic and 'lockdowns', studying behaviour during the pandemic to inform policy setting and assessing the impact of the virus on children, the elderly and vulnerable communities.

In fact, the crisis has illustrated the critical importance of research in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences as part of the holistic response to the pandemic. Several projects are interdisciplinary in nature. For example, groups modelling transmission include mathematicians, statisticians, behavioural and biomedical scientists. In another project dogs are being trained to identify if someone is infected. And in some cases, multi-lingual researchers are applying their skills to translate new research developments on COVID-19 into their local language to assist their colleagues or to inform their public and government.

Researchers have embraced the principles of Open Science during the pandemic, with over 2,000 preprint articles on COVID-19 made publicly available so far, databases have been rapidly adjusted and journals have made articles related to COVID-19 freely available. As a result, the crisis may drive Open Science further than was initially targeted for 2020. The role of innovation in universities is also clear, as a number of spin out companies are rapidly adjusting their technology to assist with the national effort.

The breadth of COVID-19-related research and innovation underpins the essential contribution of the University community to the global response. It is imperative that this is recognised by the European Commission in the on-going budget negotiations for the next R&D framework programme, Horizon Europe. Efforts should be made to track and demonstrate the important impact that research in Universities is having during the pandemic, so as to feed into both national and European policy discussions.

3.3 The response of Research Support Offices to the crisis

Thus far, Research Offices have not detected a lull in the volume of research funding applications submitted by researchers. However, many of the applications submitted in recent weeks were already at an advanced stage of development prior to the crisis and the real impact on application rates will only become evident in the coming weeks and months. This will be further exacerbated as continued restrictions in some form or other look likely to extend into the next academic year and staff will need to account for disruption to their research program as well as prepare for the possibility of online teaching or a blended approach to programme delivery extending into next year.

With only a few exceptions, across our network, Research Support Officers are working remotely. Research Support Officers and their teams are quickly learning and adapting to new online technologies, online etiquette, blurred work and home life boundaries, reimagined ways of service and business delivery, and the concurrent provision of caring (and home schooling) responsibilities. While illustrating the substantive challenges to maintaining full productivity during the crisis, our survey also revealed a number of unanticipated benefits or positive impacts on work practices that are emerging as colleagues forced apart work together to continue to support their respective research communities. These include:

- Improved communication – both at management and unit level. Staff and students are receiving regular updates from management, and at Research Office level, teams are meeting more frequently to support colleagues and ensure shared understanding, and there is an increased cross-communication between units.
- Flexibility - as Research Office staff adjust to different work routines, take extra training, learn new technologies and think creatively about to overcome the challenges of undertaking our work in different ways.
- Dexterity is displacing bureaucracy, and traditional (often paper-based) approval processes are being replaced by electronic processes, enabling faster decision-

making towards the rapid implementation of newly adopted rules, guidelines and regulations. Digital databases and e-file storage are quickly becoming the new norm for applications, contracts, reports etc.

- In practice, working from home is nothing new for most academic staff but remote working is a new possibility for many professional services staff, including Research Office staff. The members of our network are benefitting from additional training in the use of online technology. Microsoft Teams is the preferred platform with ~75% of our universities using it for internal business. Zoom, Skype and Gotomeeting are also in use.
- Online meeting etiquette - we are defining it in real-time. It's a learning curve and although we still have a way to go in terms of how to 'read a *virtual* room' during a meeting, the human aspect of a glimpse or sound of a child or pet provides a welcome relief against the backdrop of these challenging times.

3.4 The response of Universities to the crisis

At an institutional level, and where funds are available, a number of Universities have established internal rapid COVID-19 seed funding calls to prime an agile response by researchers to the crisis. Furthermore, some members have received philanthropic donations from businesses and foundations wishing to support COVID-19 research.

The restrictions have hampered international mobility, a hallmark of research activity, and significantly impacted the recruitment of researchers to our universities. Staff on short-term contracts, such as postdoctoral researchers, whose salary is paid by a research grant, are especially vulnerable to the effects the crisis may have on their deliverables, which may ultimately affect their career progression. In the future, universities will need to make allowances for these impacts during recruitment and promotion processes. Many universities are trying to source internal bridge funding that could continue to pay contract researchers in between projects should the start of an intended new project be delayed, however external support will be needed in the vast majority of cases.

Charles University in Prague is facilitating the redirection of internal travel funds in support of other research costs arising as a result of the crisis. Some universities have described excellent methods they have developed to help contract researchers approaching the end of their contract during the crisis, by, for example, in **Durham University** identifying suitable open positions in newly operating COVID-19 research projects. Nonetheless, these efforts will not suffice as a standalone measure and universities are entering a period of significant financial deficit as sources of income, such as international student fees, are affected by the pandemic. Therefore, the support of funding agencies to ameliorate the effects of this crisis on research and research staff is critical.

As Europe begins to reopen over the coming months, Universities will need to consider the safest approach to returning to work, this may include a prioritisation exercise to determine which staff should return to campus first, and whether they need to have continuous or occasional presence. Rotating groups of staff within units in a shift pattern may reduce the transmission risk as would increasing physical distances between desks. Some Universities report that empty lecture halls may be repurposed to expand office space during this time. Appropriate sanitation measures need to be considered also.

3.5 The response of Funding Agencies to the crisis

Funding agencies are themselves adapting to remote working also. Cognisant of the significant impact of the current situation on the research and innovation community, funders have taken a two-pronged response to the COVID-19 emergency. First and foremost, and almost unilaterally, funders have quickly rolled out Rapid Response COVID-19 funding calls, while the deadlines for scheduled non-COVID-19 calls have been postponed until later in the year. In time, this may impact continued innovation in areas that now sit outside the COVID-19 prioritisation calls.

Second, some national funders have signalled an awareness that research projects may experience unavoidable delays as a result of the practical measures taken to contain the spread of the virus, and an openness to adopting a pragmatic case-by-case consideration of projects to facilitate appropriate measures that may prove necessary. However, at this point in time, as governments plan for the unwinding of restrictions amidst continued health risks and many uncertainties, the nature and the extent of the impact of the closures, on funded projects remains difficult to assess. A small number of universities have undertaken a self-assessment of the impact of remote working on the productivity of researchers. There are discipline-specific variances, but overall, the vast majority of researchers remain productive. However, a lot will depend on how quickly researchers can return to their labs, and how this will be achieved, *e.g.*, it may happen on a phased basis or researchers may be asked to work in shifts to maintain compliance with public health protocols.

Collectively, our members firmly recommend a flexible response is needed in the coming months by all funders, national and international. Many funding agencies have already begun to implement impact mitigation measures in grant management. These efforts are appreciated by the research community. Flexible measures for consideration include:

- Funded extensions for PhD fellowships
- Funded extensions for existing research projects for defined periods
- Allowing budget reallocations to move budget between categories, *e.g.*, redirect travel support towards salary, or consumables towards software/hardware/digital connectivity
- Simplified and streamlined grant amendment processes *e.g.* using simple eForms and eSignatures.
- Extending normal reporting deadlines and making allowances for the impact of the crisis in the assessment of any deliverables
- Allowing postponed start dates for new awards
- Extended funding call deadlines

3.6 Key takeaways for the Higher Education Community

Researchers have shown great resolve in responding to the emergency and moving as much research online as possible. However, the longer access is restricted to laboratories, the greater the impact on research productivity. Across the Coimbra Group network, researchers wish to return to their labs as soon as possible. Against the uncertainty of how restrictions and limitations will be unlocked, and the certainty that social distancing protocols will inevitably

remain in place in some form or other for many months, universities are starting to plan for re-starting research activity on campus.

As we enter the next phase of the crisis, analysis of the survey responses points to the following research-related recommendations for universities:

- Establish a COVID-19 Research Recovery Group to consider and prioritise a planned and phased re-opening of laboratories and on campus research activity. There must be real-time and continued assessment of the impact of the closure and re-opening on research and innovation
- Engage with local businesses to draw on their experiences of phased re-introduction of work place-based activity and implementing public health protocols in the workplace
- Risk assess all on-going projects by research group, with a particular focus on risks associated with industry-/charity-funded research contracts. Where a contract is deemed high risk in terms breach of contract, negotiate with the funder on a flexible approach to deliverables and extensions
- For consortia-based projects, plan for substituting physical mobility with virtual mobility / blended mobility in project implementation
- Establish review processes to assess and progress business critical recruitment of researchers where the funding is confirmed and researcher can work remotely, pending the re-start of campus-based activity
- Quantify the staff cost of funded extensions for on-going projects for defined extensions to assess the cost implications by funder
- Contract researchers such as Postdoctoral Researchers are especially vulnerable, Universities should consider assisting these staff by, for example, mobilising existing externally-funded researchers to COVID-19 Rapid projects
- As researchers engage with the government, media, charities and industry to help with the global response, Universities should support these endeavours by putting appropriate contracts and insurance in place to protect these researchers
- The breadth of COVID-19-related research underpins the essential contribution of the University community to the global response, however many local and national governments will be considering how best to offset the coming recession by making budget cuts. Efforts should be made to track and demonstrate the important impact that Universities are having during the pandemic and these findings disseminated to national and international policy makers for consideration.
- Research Support Offices and other units should consider the benefits of continuing flexible work arrangements, such as allowing working from home, beyond the current crisis.
- In the future, efforts must be made to allow for the impact of the crisis when considering the track-record of a researcher during recruitment and promotion processes. Selection committees must be cognisant that the impact on researchers may be unequal and equality initiatives should be supported

3.7 Key takeaways for Funding Agencies

- From all funders we seek flexibility and additional support; a single solution will not work for all projects. In particular, funded extensions would ameliorate the detrimental impact of the restrictions on research projects dependent on lab-/field based activity and enable research to get back on track in a timely manner.
- It is critical that the budget for Horizon Europe reflects a reinforced recognition of the critical role of research and innovation in addressing global challenges and contributing to economic activity and that the budget is increased accordingly.
- The simplification and streamlining of pre and post award research project management seen in Universities and in the draft implementation strategy of Horizon Europe is to be welcomed. Across all funders we call for the expedited application of improved processes to best facilitate rapid research mobilisation and campuses operating remotely.
- The crisis has reaffirmed the urgent need to transition to Open Science. The acceleration of Open Science has proved beneficial to all, including researchers and public and private organisations. Support for Open Science initiatives and the infrastructure needed must not be compromised in the reprioritisation exercises taking place currently and into the future

Within our universities, we stress the importance of encompassing a prioritisation of research and innovation in Business Continuity Planning at an institutional level.

We remind our government and European leaders of the pivotal role that university research and innovation across all disciplines is playing in the response to this global emergency, and the critical importance of a continued and sustained investment in research and innovation now and beyond the crisis. We call on our research community to continue the principles and practices of real-time sharing of scientific knowledge, which have been applied to COVID-19 research in recent months, into the future to underpin a more efficient, rapid and transparent approach to addressing global challenges.

4. Doctoral Studies

By Dr Gunda Huskobra (University of Jena), Chair of the Coimbra Group Doctoral Studies Working Group and Jean-Marie Pincemin (University of Poitiers), Vice-Chair of the Coimbra Group Doctoral Studies Working Group

The current situation is also affecting doctoral education and research. Doctoral researchers are in a qualification phase. While there are many different ways on how to do a doctorate in Europe, there is one unifying principle that all Coimbra Group universities can agree upon: At the core of doctoral qualification is independent, original research (Salzburg II Principles). This research contributes significantly both to the personal professional development of the doctoral candidates as well as to the universities' overall research activities. The doctoral phase is usually limited in time as it aims at the awarding of a degree. The exact layout of doctoral training is embedded within discipline-specific approaches to generating new knowledge as well as country-specific academic cultures.

4.1 The impact of the closure of universities on doctoral research

For doctoral candidates, the emergency operating mode of the universities is of big concern. Most laboratories and libraries are closed. Regulated access to research facilities is an exception. There are only a few examples of libraries which offer digital services or have introduced contact-free borrowing of books (e.g. with smart lockers).

The University Library of the **University of Tartu** has introduced contact-free borrowing of books using ID cards and Smart Lockers.

At the **University of Turku**, the University Library has opened a service for loaning out material that is critical for research in humanities and social sciences. It consists of an airlock-type system that guarantees safety to all parties involved.

Data collection which involves face-to-face interactions is prohibited. Current and future travelling, fieldwork and placement activities had to be stopped or postponed until further notice.

Of course, there are cases in which it is possible to work remotely. For instance, data collection which does not require direct personal contact can continue during this period (e.g. electronic surveys/questionnaires, interviews by phone or video-conferencing). Besides, doctoral candidates who currently write down results may profit from less distractions due to the isolation in home-office. Still, many doctoral candidates will potentially face an extension of their time-to-degree, especially if the restrictions last for a longer period. It is important to note that this may result in funding problems, particularly for scholarship holders, employees with fixed-term contracts and participants in international funding programmes or joint PhD programmes (e.g. cotutelle agreements). At present, it is not possible to foresee how the Coimbra Group universities will deal with this problem. While some do not see the necessity for any extension, others are in favour of case-by-case decisions to take account of individual circumstances (e.g. lack of access to resources, periods of illness, caring responsibilities). Some universities offer an (unfunded or funded) interruption or extension upon request to match the duration of closure of the university. Still others are in favour of blanket solutions (e.g. automatic extensions of contracts and scholarships by x months).

The heterogeneity of answers can be explained by the fact that currently no predictions are possible on how long the restrictions will last. However, there is an overall commitment to more flexibility. After all, a few universities are examining the possibility of internally reallocating

funds (e.g. travel expenses) in order to bridge projects and fund extensions.

The precarity of fixed-term contracts is an important issue for **Durham University**. The university is considering to use internal funds to bridge projects and to recycle funding where it must be spent in certain periods so that they can free up alternative funding for future investment.

The university internal grant agency of **Charles University in Prague** has enabled young researchers to make use of money originally allocated for travel expenses for other purposes, provided such change is reasonable.

4.2 Dealing with PhD defences

After the closure of universities, the biggest challenge in doctoral education is the handling of academic procedures. Typical questions are: How can doctoral candidates submit their thesis? Is it possible to conduct PhD defences, viva voces and other forms of oral examinations? Is there a need to change regulations and protocols?

Within the network, most universities changed to e-submission or thesis submission by mail. E-submission is in operation e.g. at the **Universities of Dublin, Durham, Edinburgh, Galway, Göttingen and Granada**. The **University of Granada** additionally provides a public URL pointing to the pdf of newly submitted theses. This link will only allow visualisation, but not downloading of the manuscript.

In the UK and Ireland, there is the possibility of virtual viva voce examinations. Protocols and regulations have remained mainly unchanged as regulations allow for this mode of defence. In most other European countries, PhD defences have to be public and the audience may be allowed to ask questions. Additionally, there are also regulations in some countries on when the defences have to take place (e.g. two months after the thesis has been accepted).

A very small number of universities decided to completely suspend PhD defences until the end of the crisis (e.g. **Istanbul University**). In contrast, the Italian **Universities of Bologna and Pavia** award PhD degrees without delay by running all scheduled defences remotely.

Most universities opt for a choice between postponing defences and defending online. Some universities allow for mixed online and face-to-face defences in which the doctoral candidate and the chairperson are present (in compliance with hygiene requirements) while the rest of the examining board and possibly the public participate online.

In fact, there are mainly two set-ups for online defences:

- Online defences may take place without the public and in exceptional cases only.
- The **University of Jena** defines urgent exceptional cases which can be, in particular, the imminent expiry of residence permits, the prohibited entry into the country or the necessity of a doctorate qualification for employment contracts or appointments. As this is an exceptional rule, the public can be excluded for the time being.
- Online defences can take place as scheduled, including the public. This can be arranged, for example, by including a public link to the defence announcement so that everyone interested can join as a participant (possible with Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other video conferencing tools).

- Online defences with a public link are held, for instance, at the **Universities of Bergen, Tartu, Turku and Åbo Akademi University**. The **University of Bergen** streams defences to an audience in real time (sound and video) and provides a possibility for the public to ask questions. The **University of Turku** reports: When the audience is allowed to ask questions, it is advisable to keep everyone muted and to designate an extra person responsible for monitoring possible audience interaction and conveying it to the chairperson of the examining board in an agreed manner.

An interesting observation is that many universities of the Coimbra Group network modified regulations shortly after the beginning of the lockdown. Some technicalities had to be solved, such as a procedure to arrange for a secret *cum laude* voting in Spain (**University of Granada**). Eventually, some countries even changed legislation during the last weeks in order to allow for online defences (like in Romania, **Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași**).

4.3 Managing doctoral supervision and doctoral training

Due to the individual nature of doctoral training, distance-learning and remote working were often already in use or at least not difficult to apply. While lab-based research and group activities are severely restricted, doctoral supervision can continue remotely. Some universities have online platforms in place for monitoring the doctoral candidate's progress, which is helpful in times of social distancing (e.g. the **Universities of Bergen, Granada, Tartu and Turku**).

The **University of Turku** points out that each person needs to have a substitute so that important online administration processes (e.g. the graduation process) are working, even if the administrator is absent.

Only a few countries have mandatory course requirements at the doctoral level. These courses were shifted to online teaching. Additionally, the majority of Coimbra Group universities offers complementary qualification programmes for doctoral researchers, such as transferable skills training. Although there is no compelling need to convert these offerings to online formats, several universities report that they have adapted their programmes. The online courses are well received. Interestingly, doctoral researchers who have to stay at home increasingly use the opportunity for further training, participation in various online activities as well as web-based science outreach activities (e.g. blogs and videos). Besides, doctoral candidates who are normally not on campus are given the chance to participate more frequently.

The **Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași** reports that doctoral candidates who are normally not on campus have more time to attend to various online activities due to the lockdown situation.

The **University of Poitiers** observed that doctoral researchers who were stuck at home started to create new science outreach web activities, like videos and experiments.

4.4 Institutionally supporting doctoral researchers during the crisis

The majority of Coimbra Group universities has established institutional structures for doctoral education (e.g. doctoral schools, graduate academies, graduate schools). These units offer information and services for doctoral researchers. Usually, they are also places for communication, collaboration and peer support.

The survey shows that doctoral schools continue their activities and keep supporting their doctoral researchers (of course with reduced staff capacity due to caring responsibilities and home schooling). Reported tasks include:

- Adaptation of administration processes, especially at universities that have not moved to full online administration of doctoral education before the current crisis yet.
- Compilation of information for doctoral researchers in order to reduce their insecurities that result from the current situation of crisis. For instance, several universities provide specific FAQs to bundle information on how the COVID-19 emergency mode affects doctoral researchers.
- Online consulting hours, remote counselling, live online sessions to solve doctoral researchers' issues and queries.
- Online qualification offers, e.g. workshops, boot camps (thesis writing) and writing weeks.
- Online networking opportunities, e.g. online blogs, online photo competition and virtual coffee hours.

FAQs specifically for postgraduate researchers can be found for example at the Universities of [Cologne](#), [Edinburgh](#) and [Jena](#). The **University of Edinburgh** specifically recognises that during this uncertain time remote working is not easy. Therefore, they not only inform on academic procedures, but also provide comprehensive information on how to look after the wellbeing whilst working on a PhD at home.

Below are some other examples of supporting activities:

- The **University of Granada** offered a live on-line session to solve issues and queries of doctoral researchers. Several specific e-mail addresses are available to answer their queries.
- The Graduate Academy of the **University of Jena** ran an Online Writing Week for doctoral and postdoctoral researchers which was very well attended.
- At the **NUI Galway**, they have established online blogs, boot camps (thesis writing) and workshops.
- The Institute for Academic Development (IAD) at the **University of Edinburgh** has begun to offer virtual coffee breaks for postgraduate researchers.

4.5 Key takeaways for the Higher Education Community

Adaptation has been the key word of the last weeks. With social distancing requirements, there was an urgent need to change regulations and processes for doctoral supervision, training, deadlines and especially PhD defences. Just like more experienced researchers, doctoral candidates have moved as much research online as possible. However, ongoing restrictions of limited access to laboratories and libraries will not only have an impact on research productivity, but will also cause existential hardship and concern about the successful completion of the doctoral thesis.

The analysis of the survey responses points to the following recommendations for universities related to doctoral education and research:

- Allow for more flexibility with respect to the time-to-degree.
- Where possible, adjust PhD projects so that they can be conducted remotely.
- Keep in mind that the finalisation of many PhD projects may be in danger due to fixed-term contracts and scholarships.
- Support the extension of the funding period for doctoral scholarships and project positions, if research activities have been significantly interfered.
- An automatic extension of contracts and scholarships is at the expense of the next generation of doctoral researchers, unless funds can be converted or additional funds will be made available by funding agencies and governments.
- Keep up a mix of online and face-to-face offers for doctoral researchers to allow for participation of people who are usually not on campus or who need more flexible times, e.g. for balancing research activities, caring responsibilities and further training.
- Revisit changes to academic procedures and possibly update existing regulations and protocols after the emergency phase has ended. If not already in place, this is an opportunity to permanently allow for online defences and more flexibility in academic procedures.

5. The contribution of universities to the global response

Coimbra Group universities have been supporting their local communities in many ways in these challenging times of COVID-19 outbreak, in areas as diverse as medical and health support, public information and engagement, cultural events and community engagement. Collaboration between universities and municipalities is a core value of Coimbra Group universities, and a collaborative framework for Coimbra Group Universities and their Municipalities was formalised in the [“Poitiers Declaration”](#), launched in 2016 by Coimbra Group Rectors and the Mayors of the cities in which they are located. The wide spectrum of activities geared towards community engagement and service to society is part and parcel of universities’ role in their ecosystems. This is all the more evident during this global health emergency, which is impacting areas well beyond the health sector per se.

5.1 Medical support

Besides the research being carried out which has been reported in section 3 of this report, universities have been supporting the medical emergency in many ways and are involved in national, regional and municipal emergency groups. Other activities include:

- The generation of new tests for rapid diagnosis, coordination of reserve testing capacities for corona infections in the laboratories of the university and the city.
- Making available lab equipment and specialized staff; delivering equipment to hospitals, producing hydro-alcoholic solutions for the local hospitals and disinfectant gels.
- Developing protocols, for example for the multiple disinfection/reuse of personal protective equipment; for monitoring the COVID-19 patients who are treated at home.
- Fast tracking medical students to graduation and to work in hospitals; offering staff and student volunteers to work in hospitals and municipal health services.

Just to mention some concrete examples, the **University of Bologna** reports that, as soon as the emergency arose, thanks to the support of the entire university community, new ad hoc labs were set up in only three days to carry out complex safety tests for mask use. One chemistry lab at the **University of Poitiers** partly re-opened to produce hydro-alcoholic solutions for the local hospitals.

5.2 Public information

At this time where fake news is spreading, the importance of universities in providing reliable information has been fundamental. University academics have been appearing in national and local media, providing videos of COVID-19 related research activities and posting them on the university websites. Universities have been providing lists of experts from a wide range of disciplines to be contacted on various Corona-related issues for the media and local authorities. The **University of Graz** informed that Austrian universities published a list of experts from different academic disciplines as contact points for various questions/topics related to the coronavirus crisis. Researchers at the **University of Geneva** are members of

the national and cantonal task forces devoted to the COVID-19 crisis. The Vice-rector for Research at **Charles University in Prague** is the lead coordinator for cooperation between universities, research organizations and the state regarding testing samples for the coronavirus.

5.3 Cultural and community-building initiatives

Universities have been key in providing cultural initiatives to their local communities. Activities include opening up free online courses, digital content, webinars and seminars to the general public as well as developing new projects of cultural activities (online readings of literature, debates, on-line sports, photo contests, on-line concerts).

The **University of Granada** has organised events and debates to understand the current crisis and the possible channels to face it, such as the debate cycles [“Dialogues with Equality”](#), whose objective is to carry out an analysis on gender violence and how the pandemic and the state of confinement have affected it, and [“SDG Debates: A call to Action”](#), whose objective is to learn from the current crisis and devise channels to generate sustainable development aligned with the 2030 Agenda.

Universities have been partnering in collaboration with local organisations in actions of solidarity and support to particularly vulnerable groups, for example the homeless and the elderly. Students have been helping with child care of doctors while kindergartens are closed, offering help and company to elderly citizens, supporting school children in their educational activities etc.).

Students of the **University of Bologna** and the Emilia Romagna region in Italy participate in the ten-day [“Oper.TEN”](#) project path, consisting of tackling four areas of the “new” life under coronavirus crisis, in collaboration with the municipality of Bologna and several local associations. Initiatives included activities geared towards helping lonely elderly people feel connected to family and friends, a programmed booking and collection system for grocery shopping, a package of teaching tools designed to help educators and families in the home management of children, and a recovery network for unused electronic devices, for those who need them for online teaching.

The **University of Granada** cited its project [“We learn from our elders”](#), which connects Physical Activity and Sports Science Degree’s students with older people who are in residences to carry out personal accompaniment and collect their testimonies of life.

Istanbul University organises charity activities in cooperation with the local municipalities and the Turkish Red Crescent for supplying the needy foreign students with nutrition and cleaning products. Besides this, the Public Relations office published a special [e-bulletin](#) for raising awareness of COVID-19’s impact on different social settings.

Durham University, as a member of the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) alongside local authority and emergency services, has been helping in providing accommodation for emergency workers.

Vilnius University has encouraged [donations to medical resident students](#) working in Lithuania.

Some universities have also been providing information and advice to local businesses, connecting students with people, companies and organizations looking for help. The **Cologne University** Foundation awards one-off aids of 800 euros for up to 250 students in financial need who have lost their student jobs due to the COVID-19 crisis. The **University of**

Barcelona informed that an extraordinary call for grants – [ConnectaUB](#) – was launched in order to mitigate the digital divide by facilitating the temporary use of laptops and internet connectivity to economically disadvantaged students who are not equipped to continue their academic activity virtually.

True to their mission, universities have demonstrated once again that their commitment to society goes well beyond education and research. Universities play a key role in their ecosystems by fostering social, cultural and economic wealth. This especially the case for the universities of the Coimbra Group, which, being located in small- or medium-sized cities, have a symbiotic relationship with their surrounding environment. Service to society and cooperation with local actors is something which is deeply rooted in the Coimbra Group universities' long history and continues to be one of their main distinguishing features. The signing of the [“Poitiers Declaration”](#) in 2006 reaffirms the importance of university-city cooperation.

Recommendation:

Universities' contribution to both scientific and social innovation has been a game changer in the way our societies have been responding to the COVID-19 crisis. It is likely that local and national governments will be considering budget cuts in order to mitigate the pandemic's negative impact on the economy. This is why it is important that universities provide evidence of the impact of their work during the pandemic and ensure that their achievements are widely disseminated to all funders, local, national and European.

6. Looking to the future

The severe disruption to teaching, learning, research and mobility caused by the coronavirus outbreak is posing enormous challenges to the academic community, while at the same time offering a rare opportunity for finding innovative, creative and novel approaches to education and research.

As restrictions are slowly being lifted in several countries, there continues to be much uncertainty about the medium- and long-term implications of the pandemic on academia. It is impossible to forecast what the future will look like a few months from now, whether and how international travel will resume and how priorities and choices will be impacted. That said, the approaches and dynamics adopted by the Coimbra Group universities in response to the pandemic emergency provide some food for thought in the areas of teaching and learning, the international dimension, Open Science, the contribution of universities to the global response, social responsibility, equity and inclusion and funding.

While many of the challenges outlined here have been abruptly brought to the surface by the Coronavirus crisis, it is important to underline that the 40 constituent universities of the Coimbra Group have been working together on the advancement of these issues for many years already through exchange of knowledge and practices and also in annual high level policy seminars on education and research.

This translates into a wealth of experience and expertise. This paper and the recommendations outlined herewith are not just the result of the online consultation run among Coimbra Group member universities from 8 to 22 April, but they are also backed up by decades of experience and practice in international academic cooperation.

6.1 Teaching and learning

This global health crisis is already having important social and economic repercussions all over the world and, in this process, is bringing to the surface the importance of a number of crucial issues ranging from international cooperation in research, to critical thinking, science communication and artificial intelligence, to name only a few. Clearly, a holistic, interdisciplinary and innovative approach to learning and knowledge production is what is needed. While technology is supporting teaching and learning at present, it is not technology alone that will resolve the challenges universities are currently facing, but university staff, the teaching and learning communities which are created both within and across institutions, and the personal communication and care that we provide to our students. The emergency remote teaching solutions that have been put in place are temporary solutions and as such do not equate to quality online learning. There is already a strong body of research on online and blended approaches to teaching and learning, which needs to be taken into account in the design of medium and longer term solutions.

Recommendations:

- There is a great deal of knowledge and experience which has not been readily available to institutions when needed. What is needed is systematic dissemination of the outcomes, results, resources and tools developed in EU projects funded over many years and related to all the issues with which universities have been

struggling over the past two months.

- It would be useful to evaluate institutions' efforts and preparedness for emergency remote teaching and identify strengths and weaknesses with a view to developing a long-term strategy.
- Invest in strategies that support the mission of public universities and the development and support of their staff so that they are equipped to provide students with online and blended learning experiences and forms of assessment that are equitable, fair, accessible, relevant to their local contexts as well as the global context.

6.2 Mobility and the international dimension

Since physical mobility will most likely be an issue in the academic year 2020-21, it is essential to revisit the concept of internationalisation by exploring novel ways of designing university curricula so that they contain an international dimension while being fit for online learning.

While the need to break silos in higher education institutions was already voiced well before the COVID-19 crisis, this endeavour now ought to be addressed with urgency. What is needed to face the future are institutions with holistic, comprehensive internationalisation at home strategies which involve the whole university.

Recommendations:

Invest in measures which can support the development of universities' comprehensive "internationalisation at home" strategies, which address issues of diversity, equity and inclusion for both domestic students and international students (Jones 2017¹), in both online and offline contexts. Comprehensive internationalisation at home is a means of strengthening universities' international profiles and networks, as well as improving the quality of student and staff mobility when this is once again possible. Funded activities could include:

- Professional development for administrative and teaching staff on internationalisation at home, global and intercultural competences; social and academic integration;
- Cooperation projects that support the collaborative design, implementation, assessment and quality assurance of networked courses and curricula;
- The participation of students and staff in already existing quality virtual exchange programmes (such as [Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange](#)), and the extension of the geographic scope of these from Europe and the Mediterranean to a more global reach;
- Investments in staff and structures dedicated to 'internationalisation at home' - in the same way as has been done for physical mobility;
- Pedagogic support for the design of quality blended mobility programmes;
- Technology and internet connectivity where required.

¹ Elspeth Jones (2017) Problematising and reimagining the notion of 'international student experience', *Studies in Higher Education*, 42:5, 933-943, DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2017.1293880

Support initiatives for a more inclusive and simpler Erasmus+ programme, such as the #Erasmus500 proposal for a baseline mobility grant of 500€/month from 2021 onwards. In the current context, the EU Institutions and national policy-makers more than ever have to strengthen the investment in Knowledge: this includes an ambitious Erasmus+ budget for 2021-2027.

6.3 Research and Innovation

The COVID-19 crisis reiterates the importance of multi- and inter-disciplinary research and Open Science. It did not take very long before what presented itself as first and foremost a public health emergency revealed its multifaceted nature: the widely known repercussions on the political, social and economic spheres will require a serious collective reflection on issues related to civil rights, democracy, values and ethics. Clearly, insights from research in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences will be crucial for the immediate fight against the pandemic but even more so for the re-ordering of our societies in a post-COVID-19 era.

In the race to understand and fight the virus, the transition to Open Science will likely advance much faster than originally planned for 2020. While the sharing of and public access to research data and results are key to tackle the pandemic, there are many challenges and pitfalls that come with this and need careful consideration. Ever since the pandemic hit, issues related to the interpretation of data, data collection and the verification of scientific results have been frequently spotlighted by the mainstream media, in an attempt to keep citizens informed. Nevertheless, this has often led to confusion at best and misleading information at worst. This crisis has highlighted the importance of how science communication is done and citizens' trust in science.

Recommendations:

Efforts must be made to accelerate the transition to Open Science and ensure that doctoral candidates and researchers from all disciplines are trained in its principles and practice.

Increased investment in human capital will be needed to support all researchers, in particular doctoral candidates and post-doctoral researchers, whose work and career path progression have been heavily affected by the restrictive measures in place during the pandemic. The creation of special grants could be one solution.

Finally, it is essential that the breadth of the contribution of universities is recognised by the European Commission and that the budget for the next research and innovation framework programme, Horizon Europe, is increased accordingly.

6.4 Social responsibility, equity and inclusion

Whilst universities have responded to the pandemic in the best ways they could, the situation has highlighted issues related to equity and inclusion and access. In terms of socio-economic status, not all students or staff have access to computers and quality broadband connection, quiet or safe places to study or work at home, financial security. Students and staff from minoritized groups are at greater risk of social and academic exclusion. Many students and staff have caring responsibilities, with young children and elderly relatives, and the burden of

care and its emotional, physical and financial toll is predominantly taken on by women. Any imbalances should be taken into consideration.

Recommendation:

Support structures and mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that public universities meet their mission and can put into practice university values. Specific hardship funds could be directed towards students, scholars at risks and researchers in a precarious situation, including young researchers.

6.5 Flexible responses to procedures and funding

Amid the diverse national and institutional contexts and the consequent differences in how the emergency was tackled, flexibility and agility appear to be the common denominator across Coimbra Group constituent universities. Emergency teams were quickly set up, staff worked relentlessly to offer assistance to the hundreds of international students as well as home students abroad, and they did so in the context of a rapidly evolving situation and with little information at hand on travel restrictions.

Exceptional circumstances call for exceptional measures, and it was with remarkable agility that unprecedented measures were indeed put in place, with changes to academic procedures and protocols happening within only a few weeks, which would have been bureaucratically unconceivable in pre-coronavirus times. Given the likelihood of social distancing and other restrictive measures becoming the norm in the foreseeable future, this is an opportunity for universities to revisit changes to academic procedures and update existing regulations and protocols after the emergency phase has ended.

Recommendations:

This is also an opportunity to keep or put in place measures and practices which make our universities more accessible, equitable and ecologically sustainable for students and staff, for instance:

- Flexibility in modes of teaching: supporting quality blended modes of teaching and learning based on socio-constructivist principles and actively engage students in the learning process (not merely passive recipients of streamed lectures)
- Flexibility in assessment: more development and use of formative and continuous modes of assessment; Allowing for online thesis defences
- Flexibility in working practices: Smart/remote working for staff who request it

Likewise, when it comes to funding programmes, a flexible response will be needed in the coming months by all funders, national and international.

6.6 Concluding remarks

Finally, it is striking to observe that amid pandemic-related stress and work overload, staff at Coimbra Group universities took steps to reach out to their counterparts within the Coimbra Group network to exchange on the challenges they were – and still are – facing. The Coimbra Group Office offered assistance in setting up online brainstorm meetings as well as an online

questionnaire to be circulated to all constituent universities. Given the circumstances and the relatively tight deadline (two weeks, which included the Easter weekend), a low response rate would have been unsurprising. However, as it turned out, colleagues across the Coimbra Group network responded swiftly, and very eagerly so. This was something they spontaneously set out to do and, most probably, felt an actual need to.

This anecdote exemplifies that, in the midst of pandemic havoc, with national borders closing down, members of a European network of universities such as the Coimbra Group instinctively turned to their peers across Europe. International university networks are the repositories of years of expertise and collaboration. By virtue of their affiliation, members can tap into this wealth of expertise rapidly and with agility. This is, after all, a global crisis and as such it can be best challenged with a collaborative approach and a global mindset. The European Commission should play a pivotal role in this crisis, supporting universities not only when it comes to the activities funded within framework programmes, but also in trying to harmonise national responses to the crisis.

The Coimbra Group applauds the European Commission for its recent initiatives promoting true European solidarity against the COVID-19 crisis: as we have experienced within our network, openness and solidarity have never been so important and will remain key for ensuring a resilient and sustainable Europe. Universities always have been and will continue to be committed to this endeavour as science knows no boundaries. On the eve of a new Multi-Annual Financial Framework for the European Union for 2021-2027 and only a few weeks before the adoption of crucial Communications for the future of European Higher Education and Research (renewed Digital Education Action Plan, renewed European Research Area), the European Commission is best placed to play a pivotal role in this crisis, supporting universities not only when it comes to the activities funded within framework programmes, but also in trying to harmonise national responses to a crisis.

Annex 1

Coimbra Group Universities - Coronavirus related websites	
Aarhus Universitet	https://medarbejdere.au.dk/en/corona/
Åbo Akademi University	https://www.abo.fi/en/news/instructions-for-staff-and-students-at-aau/
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași	http://www.uaic.ro/en/COVID-19-information/
Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna	https://www.unibo.it/en/homepage
Charles University	https://cuni.cz/UKEN-379.html?news=9601&locale=en
Durham University	https://www.dur.ac.uk/coronavirus/
Eötvös Loránd University	https://www.elte.hu/en/coronavirus
Friedrich-Schiller Universität Jena	https://www.uni-jena.de/en/200407_Corona_Informationen_en
Georg-August-Universität Göttingen	https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/622964.html
Istanbul University	https://www.istanbul.edu.tr/en/content/COVID-19-information-page/announcements
Jagiellonian University	https://en.uj.edu.pl/en_US/news/-/journal_content/56_INSTANCE_SxA5QO0R5BDs/81541894/144745237
Julius-Maximilian University of Würzburg	https://www.uni-wuerzburg.de/corona/#c258631
Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz	https://news.uni-graz.at/en/detail/article/coronavirus-alle-informationen/
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven	https://www.kuleuven.be/coronavirus/english/Coronavirus-ENG
National University of Ireland Galway	http://www.nuigalway.ie/alert/
Rijksuniversiteit Groningen	https://www.rug.nl/news/2020/02/update-advice-regarding-coronavirus https://www.rug.nl/research/corona-publicaties/
Ruprecht-Karls Universität Heidelberg	https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/en/newsroom/information-about-coronavirus
Saint Petersburg State University	https://english.spbu.ru/covid
Trinity College Dublin	https://www.tcd.ie/about/coronavirus/
Turun yliopisto	https://www.utu.fi/en/information-on-coronavirus
Universidad de Granada	https://covid19.ugr.es/en
Universidad de Salamanca	https://www.usal.es/informacion-sobre-el-nuevo-coronavirus
Universidade de Coimbra	https://www.uc.pt/covid19

Università degli Studi di Padova	https://www.unipd.it/news/coronavirus
Università degli Studi di Pavia	https://web.unipv.it/coronavirus/
Università degli Studi di Siena	https://www.unisi.it/unisilife/notizie/whats-know-about-coronavirus-2019-ncov
Universitat de Barcelona	https://www.ub.edu/web/ub/en/universitat/coronavirus/index.html?
Universität zu Köln	https://portal.uni-koeln.de/en/coronavirus
Université catholique de Louvain	https://uclouvain.be/en/discover/news/news-coronavirus.html
Université de Genève	https://www.unige.ch/coronavirus/en/
Université de Poitiers	https://www.univ-poitiers.fr/en/news-on-coronavirus-COVID-19/
Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3	https://www.univ-montp3.fr/fr/actualit%C3%A9s/COVID-19-toutes-les-infos
Universiteit Leiden	https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/dossiers/coronavirus-en
Universitetet i Bergen	https://www.uib.no/en/corona
University of Bristol	https://www.bristol.ac.uk/students/coronavirus/ https://www.bristol.ac.uk/research/impact/coronavirus/
University of Edinburgh	https://www.ed.ac.uk/COVID-19-response
Université de Montpellier	https://www.umontpellier.fr/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-dispositions-a-suivre
University of Tartu	https://www.ut.ee/en/corona
Uppsala Universitet	https://www.uu.se/en/students/recommendations-on-coronavirus https://mp.uu.se/en/web/info/vart-uu/information-om-corona https://www.uu.se/en/news-media/spotlight/corona-virus
Vilniaus Universitetas	https://www.vu.lt/en/COVID-19

Annex 2

Mobility during COVID-19 outbreak (in numbers)

Table 1. Overall overview of the situation of international mobility at some Coimbra Group universities (April 2020)

Table 1 provides an overview of the volumes of incoming and outgoing students and staff in mobility during COVID-19 outbreak, incoming and outgoing students continuing their mobility virtually and of the percentage of universities with previous experience in virtual exchanges.

	Mean number of INCOMING students and staff in mobility during the COVID-19 outbreak	Mean number of OUTGOING students and staff in mobility during the COVID-19 outbreak	Mean % Incoming mobility continuing virtually *	Mean % Outgoing mobility continuing virtually *	% of Universities with previous virtual exchanges experience
Value	698	582	71,3	66,5	50
Number of responding universities	22	25	21	23	26

* The value includes both students who returned home and those who remained in the host country and continued to attend courses offered by the host university. This also includes possible "mixed" cases of students attending online courses offered by the host university and by the home university, where not all the courses listed in the Learning Agreement were offered online by the host university and integration was therefore necessary and allowed

Table 2. Situation at the Coimbra Group universities who provided data (April 2020)

Table 2 displays the data provided by respondents

Universities	Incoming	Outgoing	Incoming % virtually *	Outgoing % virtually *	Previous Experience in virtual mobility	survey
Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, Italy	2100	2000	75	75	Yes	X
Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal	941	171	75	75	No	X
Trinity College Dublin, Ireland	634	452	75	75	No	X
Durham University, United Kingdom	243	371			No	X
Université de Genève, Switzerland	353	376	75	75	Yes	X
Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Germany						X
Universidad de Granada, Spain	1994	2234	98	80	Yes	X
Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, Austria						X
Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Netherlands		818		37,5	Yes	X
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania	160	350	75	75	Yes	X

Istanbul University, Turkey	89	256	75	75	Yes	X
Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Germany	180	86		25	No	
Universität zu Köln, Germany	162	550	62,5	37,5	Yes	X
Uniwersytet Jagielloński Kraków, Poland	700	380	75	75	No	X
Université Montpellier, France	450	690	75	75	Yes	X
Università degli Studi di Padova, Italy	428	1053	62,5	37,5	Yes	X
Università degli Studi di Pavia, Italy	350	450	75	75	Yes	X
Université de Poitiers, France	2519	670	75	75	No	X
Charles University (Prague), Czech Republic	1200	600	75	62,5	No	X
Saint Petersburg State University, Russia			37,5	62,5	No	X
Universidad de Salamanca, Spain	1000	500	75	75	Yes	X
Università degli Studi di Siena, Italy	348	245	62,5	75	No	X
University of Tartu, Estonia			62,5		No	X
Turun Yliopisto, Turku, Finland	240	290	62,5	62,5	Yes	X
Uppsala Universitet, Sweden	704	587		75	No	X
Vilnius University, Lithuania	434	190	75	75	No	X
Julius-Maximilian-Universität Würzburg, Germany					Yes	X
Åbo Akademi University, Finland	129	66	75	75	No	X

* The value includes both students who returned home and those who remained in the host country and continued to attend courses offered by the host university. This also includes possible "mixed" cases of students attending online courses offered by the host university and by the home university, where not all the courses listed in the Learning Agreement were offered online by the host university and integration was therefore necessary and allowed

For statistical reasons we took the mid-point of the range.

Annex 3

Glossary	
Emergency remote teaching	This term is currently being used by education researchers to distinguish the pivot to online learning which has been adopted in this emergency situation from planned online teaching and learning https://psyarxiv.com/qdh25
Online teaching and learning	Online teaching and learning is generally based on socio-constructivist pedagogies which place (mainly asynchronous) interaction with others at the heart of the learning process. Online courses take months to design and students are strongly supported throughout the course through interactions with their tutors. https://psyarxiv.com/qdh25
Proctoring	Largely a US term for what is also known as invigilation, ie monitoring/policing of students during examinations to ensure security and integrity of the process.



Coimbra Group Universities

Aarhus Universitet (Denmark)
 Universitat de Barcelona (Spain)
 Universitet i Bergen (Norway)
 Università degli Studi di Bologna (Italy)
 University of Bristol (United Kingdom)
 Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, ELTE (Budapest, Hungary)
 Universidade de Coimbra (Portugal)
 Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin (Ireland)
 Durham University (United Kingdom)
 University of Edinburgh (United Kingdom)
 National University of Ireland Galway (Ireland)
 Université de Genève (Switzerland)
 Georg-August-Universität Göttingen (Germany)
 Universidad de Granada (Spain)
 Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz (Austria)
 Rijksuniversiteit Groningen (The Netherlands)
 Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg (Germany)
 Universitatea „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” din Iași (Romania)
 İstanbul Üniversitesi (Turkey)
 Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena (Germany)
 Universität zu Köln (Germany)
 Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie (Poland)
 Universiteit Leiden (The Netherlands)
 Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium)
 Université Catholique de Louvain (Belgium)
 Université de Montpellier (France)
 Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 (France)
 Università degli Studi di Padova (Italy)
 Università degli Studi di Pavia (Italy)
 Université de Poitiers (France)
 Univerzita Karlova (Prague, Czech Republic)
 Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет (Russia)
 Universidad de Salamanca (Spain)
 Università degli Studi di Siena (Italy)
 Tartu Ülikool (Estonia)
 Turun yliopisto (Turku, Finland)
 Uppsala universitet (Sweden)
 Vilniaus universitetas (Lithuania)
 Julius-Maximilian-Universität Würzburg (Germany)
 Åbo Akademi (Finland)

The Coimbra Group

Founded in 1985 and formally constituted by Charter in 1987, the Coimbra Group is an association of **long-established European multidisciplinary universities of high international standard**.

The Coimbra Group is committed to creating special academic and cultural ties in order to promote, for the benefit of its members, internationalisation, academic collaboration, excellence in learning and research, and service to society.

It is also the purpose of the Group to **influence European educational and research policy** and to **develop best practice through mutual exchange of experience**.

To find out more:

<https://www.coimbra-group.eu>



Coimbra Group Working Groups

The Coimbra Group Working Groups are **communities of practitioners** whose objective is to **translate the association's policy priorities into collaborative activities** aimed at providing a European response to global challenges.

They bring together academics, senior management and administrative staff who have a pivotal role within their institutions, thus amplifying the outreach potential of the working group's activities.

Working groups are set up with well-defined terms of reference by decision of the General Assembly. The work of each group is directed by a Chair elected by and among the group's members and supported by a Vice-Chair. The Executive Board oversees and co-ordinates the work of the Committees on the basis of their terms of reference and three-year work plans.

The variety of professional profiles, the geographical spread, the multi-disciplinary breadth of their members' expertise and, last but not least, a strong spirit of collegiality make the working groups dynamic knowledge hubs whose mission is to find innovative solutions to global challenges.

To find out more:

<https://www.coimbra-group.eu/our-working-groups/>