The social dimension revisited in the light of Covid-19

Panel session on “Inclusion in higher education in the digital era: way forward” within the SIDERAL final conference

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Covid-19 timeline: March-June 2020 - „emergency response“

• **March 2020:** 1\textsuperscript{st} lockdown forced HEIs into distance teaching mode within ~ 1 week → **students satisfied** with online provision; satisfaction increased over time (see slide 4)
  
  – flexibility in quality assurance requirements: e.g. introduction of online assessments/exams; alternative achievement records (e.g. written assignments)
  
  – legal adaptations for admission and selection processes (e.g. deadlines) as well as registration for examinations and their assessment

• **Mid April 2020:** Compulsory face-to-face teaching (laboratories; art classes etc.) were again held at the HEIs (strict Covid-19 safety regulations)
Covid-19 timeline: March-June 2020 - „emergency response“

- Financial improvements and support services for students:
  - „neutral” semester in summer term 2020 ➞ students could receive student support for one additional semester (also: child support, tax benefits, etc.)
  - students within Erasmus+ mobility ➞ didn’t have to pay back their grants in case of non-achievement (ECTS); greater flexibility concerning the refund of additional costs (e.g. cancelled flights)
  - Expansion of psychological student counseling (further expansion in summer-term 2021)

- Hardware: very good; internet: not so good
- 2/3 say distance teaching mode worked (very) well, independent from prior experience
- Provision of distance teaching: 2/3 perceived strong changes, 1/3 hardly any changes
- Cooperation between students was seen positively/worsened in 2021
- Feedback and communication with teachers good for less than 50%
- Great insecurity concerning exams among students (esp.: April 2020)
- Strong influence on employment, financial situation/similar in 2021
- Motivation and mental well-being decreased between 2020 and 2021
Covid responses during study year 2020/21

• **Legal framework** to enable online teaching and exams

• Regulations for lessons that cannot be held online (e.g. laboratory sessions etc.); library services, administration – safety measures (e.g.: support for Covid testing)

• **Secondary analysis** of available surveys/data from Austrian HEIs on “lessons learned” from the pandemic emergency mode of teaching & learning → results by July 2021

• **Mid-term evaluation of National Strategy on the SD** of HE includes e.g. the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on vulnerable students groups → results by December 2021
Opportunities to improve study conditions

• **Distance T&L**: accessibility for all; evaluation of existing formats → best formats will improve future T&L; development of new teaching methods (media didactics etc.)

• **“Digitalization euphoria” has its limits**; emerging discussion about quality of traditional face to face teaching and instruction

• **Development of institutional and individual resilience in HE**: How can we...
  - prepare for future difficulties (students were “forced” to study; loss of jobs etc.)?
  - preserve positive effects (e.g. better retention rates, exam activity)?
  - reduce growing mental health problems, effects on vulnerable & disadvantaged students, etc.?
Barriers to improving study conditions

- Covid-19 increased inequalities in HE (lack of hardware/internet, learning spaces; job loss; skills for self-organization/learning): challenges for whole education system
- Strong effects on mental well-being of students at all educational levels (e.g. surveys of Schober, Spiel, etc., University of Vienna)
- Specific challenges for on-boarding of first-term students
- Diversity of student body might change (e.g. economic effects on students,...)
- Supporting evidences from national surveys:
  - Student Social Survey 2023
  - Survey among upp.-sec. students in graduation year 2022