

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:** 1st 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)

(Small) Covid-19 impact student surveys (April 2020/Feb. 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