

STUDENT LIFE IN THE EHEA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As the BFUG finds itself at a crossroad, where it needs to reflect upon the future of the Bologna Process, without ignoring the threat that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on academic life, the current co-chairs of the BFUG organize two parallel sessions on the implications of COVID-19 to the Bologna Process at the on-line BFUG meeting in June 2020. For this session, which will seek to analyse the students' perspective of such implications, the results of the new survey on student life during the Covid-19 pandemic will be used as a basis to discuss possible policy recommendation for the future of the process.

The draft report of the survey, which is being shared as a separate document, and which was prepared by a team of researchers from the University of Zadar, under the coordination of Dr Karin Doolan, will serve as the basis of discussion during the session. One of the chairs of the session, namely ESU, with the permission of all the parties involved, and especially with the permission of the authors of the report, will also give a short presentation of the results of the survey during the session. We hope that through this presentation, and the preliminary report which is being made available, the BFUG will manage to have useful and constructive discussions towards making policy recommendations for the future.

It is imperative to say that all parties involved are extremely grateful for the work, efforts and resources which have gone into the compilation of this first report by the research team at the University of Zadar. This survey was disseminated by the European Students' Union (ESU), however the idea for it was a joint effort by ESU, the Institute for the Development of Education in Croatia (IDE) and an independent group of researchers from the University of Zadar. The survey also found the support of the Ministry of Education & Science of Croatia, and was carried out under the auspices of the BFUG. We sincerely hope that this will give you solid grounds for concrete discussions on how to continue making the students' life better. Kindly note that a more detailed report of the survey with new findings, particularly related to the social dimension of higher education, will be finalized for the BFUG meeting in Berlin – therefore, we propose to continue the discussion on the student life during the covid-19 pandemic within the BFUG at the next meeting in Berlin in September 2020.

The current co-chairs of the BFUG Advisory Group for Social Dimension, Croatia (Ninoslav S. Schmidt and ESU (Robert Napier), are leading this initiative on student life in the EHEA during the covid-19 pandemic and their intention was that the results of the survey inform future work for the new BFUG Advisory Group for Social Dimension 2020-2024.

The European Students' Union, University of Zadar and the Institute for the Development of Education in Croatia lead the initiative on student life in the EHEA during the COVID-19 pandemic. The current BFUG Co-chair Croatia, represented by the Ministry of Science and Education and its National Committee for Social Dimension in Higher Education, supports this initiative.



REPUBLIC OF CROATIA
Ministry of Science
and Education

STUDENT LIFE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EUROPE-WIDE INSIGHTS

Research coordinated by Dr Karin Doolan (University of Zadar, Department of Sociology)

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic which has been sweeping across Europe has made changes to many facets of life from working conditions to freedom of movement. Education has been one of the sectors disrupted by the crisis with educational provision both in Europe and globally going on-line. In higher education, on one hand, this new moment has highlighted certain advantages to on-line studying including lower living costs for students who would otherwise study away from their family home. On the other, it has underlined inequalities between students particularly in relation to differences in terms of digital skills and home environment resources. This problem was recognized at a meeting which brought together EU ministers in charge of education on April 14 2020, who noted that safeguarding equity was a major concern. Notes from the meeting include this important observation: “there are disadvantaged learners and families living in challenging and vulnerable conditions. These learners may lack access to the Internet service and necessary devices, or do not possess the skills necessary to use online opportunities. Therefore, the ministers emphasized that additional support needs to be provided for disadvantaged learners, so that nobody is left behind”¹. More generally, however, the crisis has put a spotlight on international student mobility and related higher education funding. It has also initiated conversations about what counts as useful knowledge and skills for crisis times and the extent to which such content is being nurtured in education. Furthermore, it has brought into focus classroom pedagogy, including the importance of teacher-student and student-student interactions and the nature of student assessment.

This report presents insights on student experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic based on questionnaire responses given by students studying in Europe in April 2020. The broader framework of the research was informed by the notion of resilience as “a process linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance” (Norris et al. 2008, 130). In less technical terms, the research focus has examined the capacity of students to have reasonably positive academic experiences in a disaster context such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the role of their academic environment, social networks, emotional make-up, knowledge and skills and material resources in enabling such experiences.

The structure of the report is as follows. First we lay out information about the study and present data on the social and academic characteristics of the students who took part in the study. Then we present the questionnaire findings in 6 thematic blocks:

¹ <https://mzo.gov.hr/news/main-messages-from-the-second-informal-videoconference-of-ministers-of-education-on-implications-of-the-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-on-education-and-training/3675>

academic life,
networks of support,
emotional well-being,
skills and infrastructure for studying from home,
life circumstances,
and correlates of student adjustment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the very end of the report we provide preliminary insights on students' responses to open questions which covered the advantages and disadvantages of on-line studying during the pandemic, problems students encountered and suggestions for improvement.

The authors would like to thank students from the University of Zadar who provided helpful insights for the content of the questionnaire: Adriana Petra Blažević, Julija Dadić, Nikolina Golec and Dora Štublin, as well as representatives from the European Student Union, the Institute for the Development of Education and colleagues from the University of Zadar who commented on draft versions of the questionnaire: Robert Napier (ESU), Ninoslav Šćukanec (IDE), Luka Antonina (University of Zadar, Department of Sociology), Dražen Cepić (University of Zadar, Department of Sociology) and Sven Marčelić (University of Zadar, Department of Sociology).

2. METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

2.1 ABOUT THE STUDY

An on-line questionnaire, launched on SurveyMonkey, was filled in by undergraduate and Master's, full-time and part-time students studying at European higher education institutions in April 2020. The questionnaire was launched by the European Students Union on April 21st and was open until May 3rd 2020. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous.

The questionnaire was constructed by a team of researchers from the University of Zadar in Croatia. It consisted of 7 parts (see questionnaire in Appendix) which included 31 closed-type questions and 5 open questions.

Part 1: students' socio-demographic and academic characteristics (e.g. gender, age, educational level of parents, student status, field of study);

Part 2: academic life (experiences with teaching, workload and assessment);

Part 3: infrastructure and skills for studying from home (e.g. access to a desk, a computer, a quiet place to study, confidence in using online teaching platforms such as MsTeams, Zoom etc.);

Part 4: networks of support (sources of support);

Part 5: emotional life (general well-being and experienced emotions);

Part 6: life circumstances (e.g. employment, care responsibilities, tuition fees, scholarships);

Part 7: general reflections on studying from home.

In total, 17,116 respondents from 41 European countries accessed the questionnaire. Countries which had a higher number of respondents include Portugal (6,652), Romania (3,110), Croatia (2,029) and Czech Republic (1,768). Out of the initial sample, 12,336 (or 72,61%) of them reported that their on-site classes were cancelled due to COVID-19 pandemic. However, after filling out the socio-demographic and academic characteristics block of questions, 9,196 students continued with the survey. The total number of students who responded to a particular question varied between different questions, which resulted in variation in total number of responses, meaning that a certain amount of missing values is present. This fluctuation in the total amount of responses is common in research like this.

2.2 PROFILE OF THE SAMPLE

2.2.1 Gender

Table X. presents the distribution of the gender of the respondents showing that a higher number of female (66,4%) compared to male (32,1%) and non-binary (0,4%) students filled in the questionnaire.

Table X Gender

Gender	N	%
Man	3990	32,1
Woman	8250	66,4
Non-binary	54	0,4
Prefer not to say	92	0,7
Other	29	0,3
Total	12425	100

2.2.2. Age (NOTE: THE FINAL REPORT WILL HAVE A MORE FINE-GRAINED PRESENTATION OF AGE)

The age distribution shows the prevalence of respondents from the age of 18 to 30 (93,9%).

Table X Age

Age	N	%
18-30	11682	93,9
31-40	494	4
41-50	213	1,7
51-60	47	0,4
60+	7	0,1
Total	12443	100

2.2.3. Education level of respondent's parents

The education level of the respondents' parents shows that the majority of students who completed the questionnaire have parents with minimally secondary schooling. Only a little over one tenth of students have parents with primary schooling.

Table X Education level of parents

	Parent 1	Parent 2
Primary schooling	14,4	12,9
Secondary schooling	43,5	46,6
Tertiary education	42,1	40,5
Total	100	100

2.2.4. Student status and year of study

Most of the respondents are full-time students (92,6%) and only 7,4% are part-time.

Table X Student status

Student status	N	%
Full-time	11465	92,6
Part-time	918	7,4
Total	12383	100

82,3% of respondents are undergraduate students, and 15,3% are master level students.

Table X Year of study

Which year of study	N	%
Undergraduate year 1	3435	27,7
Undergraduate year 2	2864	23,1
Undergraduate year 3	2616	21,1
Undergraduate year 4	952	7,7
Master's year 1	1284	10,4
Master's year 2	608	4,9
Other	635	5,1
Total	12383	100

2.2.5. The distribution of the main field of study

The social sciences (19,4%) and technical sciences (18,2%) are the most represented in the sample, followed by students in education (14,5%) and health and welfare (17,2%).

Table X Main field of study

Main field of study	N	%
Education	1801	14,5
Arts and Humanities	1281	10,3
Social Sciences, Business and Law	2409	19,4
Natural Life Sciences	779	6,3
Engineering, Manufacturing and construction	2258	18,2
Agriculture and veterinary medicine	528	4,3
Health and welfare	2134	17,2
Services (tourism, sports, transport)	556	4,5
Total	12398	100

2.2.6. Ability to cope with study costs

Financial problems can have an adverse effect on academic experiences. Regarding the question about the costs of study, more than half of the respondents struggle with the financial aspect of their studies: 55,4% of the students indicated having some difficulty in paying their overall costs of study. However, covering their costs of study does not seem to be a problem for 34,6% of respondents.

Table X Dealing with costs of study

Costs of study	N	%
With great difficulty	1430	11,5
With difficulty	2735	22,2
With small difficulty	3925	31,7
Quite easily	2419	19,6
Easily	1225	9,9
Very easily	630	5,1
Total	12015	100

2.2.7. Health difficulties

Health difficulties can affect academic experiences. Among questionnaire respondents, 80,7% of respondents did not indicate any difficulty in that respect. It is worth noting that 12,9% reported

some sort of mental health problem. This could be due to the effects of the lockdown during the pandemic, but it could have also preceded it.

Table X Impairments

Impaired in studies	N	%
No health problems	10043	80,7
Chronic illness	384	3,1
Mental health problems	1539	12,9
Physical disabilities	225	1,8
Other health problems	576	4,6

2.2.8. Accommodation

Before the pandemic, most of the students were living outside of their family home (55,9%) whereas 44,1% lived in their family home. It seems, however, that after classes were cancelled and quarantine measures were introduced, many students went back to their family home. 78,3% of the respondents have been living with their parents since the pandemic started.

Table X Accommodation before the pandemic

Where they lived before the pandemic	N	%
Family home	5471	44,1
Rented accommodation	4133	33,3
Student hall/dorm	2462	19,8
Other	352	2,8
Total	12427	100

Table X Accommodation since the pandemic

Where they lived since pandemic started	N	%
Family home	9732	78,3
rented accommodation	1719	13,8
Student hall/dorm	645	5,2
Other	331	2,7

Total	12418	100
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MAIN FINDINGS

For around two thirds of students who accessed the questionnaire (72.61%) on-site classes were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

LECTURES

Students were exposed to a variety of formats replacing on-site lectures: online with the lecturer lecturing in real time (74.61%), lecturers sending their presentations to students (44.51%), online with a video recording of the lecturer lecturing (32.10%) and online with an audio recording of the lecturer lecturing (20.58%). **For a small minority of students (3.75%) no online lectures had been organized as part of their course.**

The dominant method of online lectures was with the lecturer lecturing in real time (59.73%). For the majority of students, **the preferred method of online lectures is with the lecturer lecturing in real time (57.43%), which suggests that students like to have face-to-face lecturer-student interaction.**

SEMINARS

Students were exposed to a variety of formats replacing on-site seminars: online with the lecturer lecturing in real time (45.09%), through written communication with the lecturer (26.76%), online with a video recording of the lecturer lecturing (12.51%) and online with an audio recording of the lecturer lecturing (7.9%). **The dominant method of seminar provision was online with the lecturer involved in real time (38.03%).** In comparison to lectures, **a higher proportion of students (15%) reported that there was no online provision of their seminars.** Just as with lectures, students' **preferred method of online seminars is with the lecturer involved in real time.**

PRACTICAL CLASSES

Students were exposed to a variety of formats replacing on-site practical classes: online with the lecturer lecturing in real time (41.77%), through written communication with the lecturer (23.01%), online with a video recording of the lecturer lecturing (12.56%) and online with an audio recording of the lecturer lecturing (6.18%). **The dominant format was online with the lecturer involved in real time (37.9%).** **For 20.23%, of students i.e. a fifth of students there was no online provision of practical classes.** Again, just as with lectures and seminars, **the preferred method is with the lecturer involved in real time.**

Whereas only 3.75% of students reported that no replacement lectures had been organized as part of their course, a higher proportion of students reported the same for seminars (15%) and practical classes (20.23%). One explanation for this could be that it is more difficult to organize these formats of teaching on-line (small group discussions, laboratory work).

In all teaching forms, the preferred method of content delivery is with the lecturer involved in real time.

SUPERVISIONS

For a third of students there were no planned supervisions for this term. When supervisions had been organized they took on different forms: **via e-mail (52.9%)**, via video-call (36.87%), via voice call (13.74%). **Students' preferred format for supervisions is via video-call which further confirms that students prefer face-to-face interaction with academic staff.**

ASSESSMENT

On average, students agreed that their lecturers **had provided course assignments on a regular basis, responded to their questions in a timely manner and were open to students' suggestions and adjustments of online classes.** To a lesser extent, however, they agreed that lecturers had provided feedback on their performance on the assignments and informed students what their exams will look like in the new situation.

WORKLOAD

The majority of students indicated that their study workload was larger than before on-site classes were cancelled (50.74%). Only 19.04% said that their workload was smaller than before whereas 25.46% reported no changes in their perceived study workload.

SATISFACTION WITH TEACHING AND ADMINISTRATION

Students' were **mostly satisfied with how supportive lecturers have been** since on-site classes were cancelled. They were **less satisfied when it comes to the organization of their seminars and practical classes.**

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Students tended to report that they felt their **academic performance had worsened since on-site classes were cancelled.**

Students indicating a drop in academic performance are more likely to be students: who do not have a quiet place to study, do not have adequate access to course study material, have low

digital skills, do not have adequate access to a good Internet connection, with insufficient social support and who reported having mental health problems.

SUPPORT NETWORK

Students are **more likely to talk to a close family member about the COVID-19 crisis**, followed by a close friend. A **very small proportion of students would turn to institutional sources of support** such as administrative staff (1.5%).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, **students had daily communication with their close family members and close friends**. They also had weekly communication with colleagues from their course and lecturers. Communication with administrative staff was much less frequent.

9.1% of students indicated that they do not have several people they can trust to help solve their problems.

An overall conclusion for this section is that for many problems students may have they do not rely on institutional provision for solutions.

EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Students **have frequently felt frustrated, anxious and bored in relation to their academic activities** since on-site classes were cancelled. The results indicate that **students' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic might have been negatively affected**.

Lower levels of general well-being were reported by female students, those who have difficulties paying their study costs, students with mental health problems and students who do not have a quiet place to study. In particular lower levels of general well-being were reported by students who do not have a supportive social network.

SKILLS AND INFRASTRUCTURE FOR STUDYING FROM HOME

The **majority of students (80.7%) feel confident in using online teaching platforms** such as MsTeams, Zoom and similar. However, **7.9% indicated their lack of confidence** in using online teaching platforms.

The majority of students have their own computer (89.3%), however **only 41% reported they always have a good Internet connection**. **0.5% do not have their own computer**. The majority of students often or always have a quiet place to study, whereas **3.3% of students do not have a quiet place to study**. The majority also have a desk (79.2%), however **3.2% of students do not have a desk to work on**. **Only a third of students reported that they always have access to course study material**.

LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES

More than a quarter of students indicated they were worried about their health most or all of the time. Balancing care responsibilities with studying as well as the costs of living was indicated as concern most or all of the time by around a fifth of students.

WORKING WHILE STUDYING

Out of the students who have been working or were planning to work this term, **28.9% lost the job temporarily, while 12.2% lost their job permanently.** For students for whom working is a necessity to cover costs of studying this is a risk factor.

TUITION FEES

For tuition fee paying students, **the majority (75.3%) answered that their fee payment has remained the same** at their institution. For some students, **flexible ways of paying fees was introduced (13.8%) and 1.8% reported their institution had cancelled fee payment for this term.**

SCHOLARSHIPS

For students who receive scholarships, **the majority (87.4%) answered the amount of their scholarship had remained the same.** However, **for almost one tenth of students the crisis has had an adverse effect on their scholarship status** and their scholarship payment had either been postponed (4.10%), cancelled (2.9%) or reduced (2.6%).

STUDENTS' VOICE

Direct accounts of students voiced in the open-ended section of the questionnaire emphasize additional challenges for students during the COVID-19 pandemic. **Although living at and studying from home can be cheaper, less stressful and healthier due to better sleep and dietary habits,** it also can be more distracting. **Concentrating on studying in a family setting is demanding. Moreover, continued online presence and day-long working on the computer, as well as more challenging teacher-student interaction brings out some additional risks to the study experience.**