



THE PERCEIVED IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN

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Introduction

The South-Mediterranean region has been strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has aggravated pre-existing socioeconomic challenges such as youth employment, especially of university graduates, and social inequalities. In most South-Mediterranean countries, lockdowns are still in place, and all universities have been closed to different extents since March 2020. The World Bank, looking at the whole MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, noted that around 103.000.000 university students and 830.000 teaching staff are affected by the closures¹. To mitigate the impact of universities closures due to the pandemic, learning in the Southern Mediterranean has gone virtual, moving online where connectivity allows it and using television, radio, and paper-based approaches where internet access is limited. While the transition succeeded throughout the region and was able to ensure the continuity of education, the capabilities of the universities varied, with some of them seeming more knowledgeable and experienced with online learning compared to others who actually ended up providing distance learning with limited interactivity and students' support.

Countries like Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Lebanon are among those leading the change, employing multi-modal approaches and building innovative partnerships to deliver learning in new online environments, also through major national initiatives. Egypt is granting access to [the Egyptian Knowledge Bank](#), an online government library housing resources for educators, researchers, and students. Morocco has launched the [Telmid TICE initiative](#) providing hundreds of lessons in video format, also broadcasted daily through the television channel "Athaqafia". Jordan launched a national online education portal called "[Darsak](#)" through a partnership between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship, and a private enterprise called [Mawdoo3](#), gathering existing content, in the form of lessons tied directly to the Jordanian curriculum, from a number of organizations including [Edraak](#), [Jo Academy](#) and [Abwab](#). In Lebanon, the [Beirut Digital District Academy](#) has teamed up with the World Bank Skilling UP Mashreq Project and [Code.org](#) to offer free coding courses in English, French and Arabic to students across the country. In many countries the involvement of multiple categories of stakeholders has been an important condition for the success of the national initiatives. In Egypt, the cooperation between the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and mobile operators has resulted in free access to online educational platforms for students. Moroccan authorities have successfully negotiated a partnership with telecom enterprises allowing access of their educational platforms to all students without internet or data fees. In Tunisia, the country's three telecom operators have also started offering free access to educational platforms and sites of the Virtual University of Tunis. Libya's Ministry of Education has entered into an agreement with local TV stations to broadcast compulsory lessons for middle and secondary school students.

To better understand how universities in the South Mediterranean region have reacted to the pandemic and which innovative solutions have been put in place, during May 2020 UNIMED

¹ See World Bank (2020). COVID-19 impact on Tertiary Education in the Middle East and North Africa, World Bank. <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/347151590785257483/COVID-19-Impact-on-Tertiary-Education-in-Middle-East-and-North-Africa.pdf>

launched a survey among Presidents/Rectors, Vice Presidents/Vice Rectors, Offices of International Relations of its member universities in the Southern Mediterranean. The survey helped to map the initial reactions and the resilience capacity of Southern Mediterranean higher education systems, including the strategic preparedness of the governance and management. In the following 10 months, the survey results have been updated and enriched by the members of the UNIMED SubNetwork on eLearning and Open Education, and have been gathered in the present Occasional Paper, which also includes a selection of the inputs collected by UNIMED through the online platform "[Online Resilience - A collection of Online Learning Stories during COVID-19](#)".

National snapshots

Algeria

Since the explosion of the Covid 19 pandemic, and like all countries in the world, Algeria has adopted some drastic measures to face the sanitary crisis. In the sector of Higher Education and Research, the work has been led by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, Population and Hospital Reform. In the main segments of Higher Education, namely pedagogy, research and academic works, methods have been aligned with the protection imperatives of all players of the sector (students, teachers and workers). This has been done by drawing up a "framework" protocol aimed at combating the spread of Covid-19. A number of recommended steps were set up to guarantee a resumption of the university activities in order to close the academic year 2019/2020 and start the 2020/2021 academic year in a panic-free context.

Given the non-standardization and specificity of the 109 universities in Algeria, the Ministry of Higher Education has adopted a strategy structured around three main aspects. First, maintaining and strengthening distance education. The critical health situation required a paradigm shift in the exercise and organization of education based on distance learning (both lessons and tutorials). This was aimed in particular to run the teaching of transversal and discovery subjects exclusively online while keeping the teaching of the fundamental and methodological units in blended mode. For this reason, students were provided with digital tools and training sessions on distance teaching were addressed to educators. For the 2020-2021 academic year, courses were taught online via educational platforms, television transmissions and other media. To overcome the resistance of academic staff due to the novelty of online teaching, special assistance was provided by all universities to help the teachers overstep the difficulties encountered and to provide the basic elements of on-line education. Second, reorganization of face-to-face teaching. University leaders, in consultation with the educational authorities, refined their operational system by organizing face-to-face lessons through waves of students through blocked periods. This approach helped regulate the flow of students and allowed compliance with health guidelines. Recording and broadcasting were organized on a national database which contained all lessons for all levels of instruction. For students coming from vulnerable areas and who did not have the means to follow distance and remote learning, specific flexibility was provided, including passage with debts, repetition without educational delay counted, etc. Furthermore, all students, teachers and administrative staff under exchange programmes had to return to Algeria under the authority of the Ministry of Higher Education. Third, providing educational technologies Training. Starting from the number of university educators who had followed a training cycle on educational technologies by Constantine University, the Ministry of Education has worked to develop all teachers' skills in the use of ICT for educational purposes. Furthermore, some online workshops have been organised in some universities. This strategy allowed enriching the existing online teaching platforms with new resources and courses.

Egypt

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic shocked the higher education world, almost bringing it to an unprecedented stop. While, as months roll by, the impact of Covid-19 becomes more apparent, we can say that higher education in Egypt passed through three main phases: shock, adaptation, and living with. In the initial phase, higher education institutions made great efforts to ensure a smooth transition to online teaching that was not expected in such a narrow timeframe. The Egyptian government allocated funds for e-learning courses creation, distance learning platforms, virtual classes support and training. However, the pandemic has had a big impact on students' practices regarding academic work and life. The Ministry of Higher Education took three main steps to combat the spread of the virus: completing the study curricula of the spring 2020 semester through distance learning for all education activities, canceling all on campus written and oral examinations for all students who were not expected to graduate in spring 2020, and conducting on-campus written and oral examinations for all students who are expected to graduate in spring 2020 while implementing all precautionary measures, activating crisis committees in universities to follow all procedures to ensure the safety of students, faculty, and staff. Notably, traditional exams - based on a decision of each University Council - were replaced by one of the following two alternatives: submitting a research paper/report for each course or taking an e-exam for each course in which a limited number of students are enrolled. This last option was limited to those cases when the university has the infrastructure and technological capabilities to conduct exams via the internet for all students. In the second phase, the Supreme Council for Egyptian Universities approved amending the universities' regulations to allow blended education and online exams. Blended education, which does not substitute e-learning nor traditional education methods, rather depends on the combination of face-to-face and distance learning. At the same time, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology improved internet infrastructure in Egypt by increasing by six times the capacity of the local network, so to absorb the additional needs connected to online education. Moreover, the MCIT supported the distance learning system by providing an additional 20% connectivity free of charge, as well as provided free browsing service for the "Egyptian Knowledge Bank" and for other educational platforms. In addition, MCIT, the Ministry of Higher Education, and mobile phone operators in Egypt developed a number of free digital platforms to host scientific materials and lectures for university students.

During the pandemic, universities implemented a blended education system with the commitment to reduce the number of students on campus, both allowing practical training laboratories and achieving social distancing. The blended learning system allows students to be on campus between 2 and 4 days per week: 2-3 days for theoretical colleges and 3-4 days for practical colleges, according to the nature of study with an emphasis on adherence to all necessary precautionary measures. The rest of the courses are offered online through the different distance learning platforms which were launched by the Ministry of Higher Education. However, all classwork and final assessments have to be taken on campus, as it used to be before the spread of pandemic but with a limited number of students in each exam hall.

Jordan

In Jordan, since the Covid outbreak the authorities have decided to lockdown all the educational institutions (nurseries, kindergartens, schools, universities, colleges and training institutes), and since then, the majority has switched to the online mode of teaching. In the first months of this change, some universities have suffered the shortage of relevant resources and experiences, in particular in terms of technical needs, connectivity, equipment, absence of a generally accepted practice (especially for students' online assessment), and the absence of clear standards for online content design and development. In terms of students' international exchange, the vast majority of students in mobility decided to return to Jordan from different European and other countries. Equally, those who decided to continue their mobility or internship, are mostly attending their courses virtually. Notably, part of the academic staff has been engaged on joint research projects - in many cases with an important international dimension - related to the pandemic data analytics, modelling and forecasting. In this context, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MoHESR) disseminated a unified code of procedures to all universities on how to deal with the teaching process, course works and final examinations, which has been adopted throughout the country. Additionally, free online training sessions were conducted, targeted to all universities, about the use of e-learning tools and methods. And finally, in order to support students and increase their involvement in e-learning processes, free internet access was provided to students who do not have an internet service, in close collaboration with local telecommunication companies.

The major challenges that Jordanian universities have been and are still facing are technical issues, such as unstable connectivity or the lack of appropriate devices to follow online education, as well as the lack digital competencies, both of students (how to learn online) and of educators (how to teach online in an effective and inclusive way). On the positive side, the major pandemic-related opportunity which could have an impact on the Jordanian higher education system in the future is the inclusion of online learning modalities to support and complement traditional campus-based education. Sharing best practices from other universities who work within similar environments would be a good value-adding thing to cope with this crisis. This would be particularly important in the areas that are widely debated at the moment among Jordanian academics, which are students assessment, quality assurance of online education, and how to increase students' in-class interaction and satisfaction.

Lebanon

In Lebanon, the pandemic led to a complete lockdown in the country and consequently all universities were closed, even if in the months following the start of the COVID crisis some universities opted for hybrid learning involving face-to-face instruction for laboratory and practical courses while non-laboratory courses were delivered remotely, despite the many issues affecting the country: lack of facilities, students' lack of access, and generalised economic crisis. HEI's have started implementing progressively online teaching activities, however not all families have laptops or Wi-Fi connections for students to be able to learn at home. In addition to this, families are facing an economic crisis since October 2020, with the effect that not all students are paying their tuition fees and the requests for financial aid have increased. Moreover, universities are facing an issue with the accreditation of online courses by the Lebanese government.

The pandemic also had a huge impact on the internationalisation of universities, connected with the repatriation of students abroad and with the absence of international students on Lebanese campuses. In some cases, outbound mobilities have been pursued following courses online. Teaching, staff and students mobility that were planned during the semester and for the upcoming academic year were mostly cancelled. International projects were also disrupted and online activities were organized as much as possible to make up for the lost time, but they could not completely replace the pre-planned activities. Research activities related to ongoing projects were affected and many planned meetings were cancelled. On the other hand, many project proposals were submitted to COVID-19 flash calls. The Lebanese Government has stated that the academic year will be continued through online distance learning and is evaluating the full accreditation of distance learning. Universities mobilised for this: as an example, USEK led a campaign to acquire 4G4 all free of charge for all lebanese students, which might lead to a positive decision by the government.

The major challenges that universities are facing is the serious economic crisis and the uncertainty of the future: the plummeting of the national currency, the economic meltdown and the political disintegration are affecting university finances and their implications on enrolment, retention and fees. With regard to the pandemic, the main challenge - which is actually highly debated in the country - concerns the need for a national regulatory framework to ensure quality online education, as a prerequisite to guarantee meaningful distance learning and training programs for faculty and students. On the other hand, the major opportunity which could impact the higher education system in the future is the potential progress towards innovative online education, which should be connected to a better crisis management.

Libya

In Libya, almost all public universities have stopped in-presence teaching since March 2020, while very few private schools and universities continue teaching remotely. The Libyan International Medical University is the only university in the country which is currently providing regular teaching and learning using active learning strategies with full commitment of students and staff and according to the academic agenda. Several teaching institutes have started implementing online teaching strategies through academic platforms, to stay connected with their students. For instance, the Research, Consultant and Training Center (RCC) of the University of Tripoli (UOT) has encouraged students and academic staff to use the available online resources to complete their courses. Another approach considered by the UOT is to take advantage of initiatives for learning online in response to coronavirus from international institutions such as Coursera, which provides free access to over 3800 courses from leading universities and corporations. In this specific case, RCC manages the registration of UOT students in the Coursera system and evaluates the performance of their learning process.

The Ministry of Education is discussing a clear plan to support universities to remain active during the social-distancing times of the pandemic, but for the time being has ordered schools and universities to close. The pandemic has made more severe the challenges that Libyan universities are facing, including the large number of students joining universities every year with respect to the system capacity, the poor quality of some key staff, the lack of a transparent governance culture, the lack of autonomy and a generally poor infrastructure. The major opportunity which could have an impact on the higher education system in the future is moving towards blended learning, which would allow leapfrogging some of these challenges, even if the more systematic ones will still have to be faced. Also, offering training to key staff members and supporting universities to develop its infrastructure could help to cope with the crisis.

Morocco

Moroccan Higher Education Institutions are closed since March 2020 and so are the international activities of universities, with students and staff mobilities blocked and a slow down in any kind of international collaboration. The Moroccan government provided universities with distance learning platforms and electronic resources, and is monitoring the actions carried out by different institutions. In addition, several channels are being used to reach as many students as possible: the national sports TV channel has been dedicated to broadcasting lectures for university students 12 hours a day, MOOC platforms are providing content online for a number of university courses, and local radio broadcasts course content for four to eight hours per day to reach students without internet access in more rural regions. Finally, national internet providers have agreed to provide students with free internet access and large bandwidth. This approach regards the higher education context as an “e-Ecosystem”, through an innovative cross-media learning approach that goes beyond traditional web-based learning design strategies. Since the launch of the online portal TelmidTICE, which provides digital content classified according to educational levels, the average user rate of this platform is around 600,000 users per day, and the total number of digital resources that have been produced is 3000. Universities have their electronic platforms that allow professors to make their courses available to students, with a coverage rate of between 80 and 100 courses per week.

The major challenges encountered by Moroccan universities in the rapid shift they are facing are the way to deal with assessment of online learning, the organisation of the final exams, the limited digital literacy of professors in online teaching and the lack of appropriate digital devices. A second challenge is that of the technology and equipment necessary to provide distance education. The teacher must have the necessary equipment to produce educational resources as well as a good connectivity to distribute them and to follow their students without hindrance. The same goes for students who cannot comfortably take their courses online due to the lack of the equipment and connectivity. The major opportunity that will impact the higher education system in the future is the introduction of online learning as a support to university lectures and training, the improvement of IT tools and the establishment of flipped classrooms to improve the quality of learning and training. Sharing pedagogical materials, experiences and good practices is helping to cope with the crisis and is representing a support to managerial aspects regarding the university 4.0. Overall, the distance learning experience is appreciated by students and educators, but the challenges outlined above prevent the experience from being fully successful. Moreover, a significant proportion of students and teachers expressed their reluctance to live this experience in the future. Successful distance learning requires teacher training in the subject, and this in terms of the use of technology, the production of educational resources and student support. These skills are essential for the teacher to be sufficiently qualified to this task.

Palestine

Palestine has been living under permanent crisis for more than 70 years and this gave its citizens the ability to work under unusual circumstances. Schools and universities closure is usually a direct result of Israeli occupation, and this has forced Palestinians several times to find new strategies to cope and continue their education. During the pandemic, Palestinian higher education institutions have shifted to online teaching as the only alternative, although this teaching modality is not recognized by the Higher Education Ministry, which is currently working on an online learning policy. Different universities have different previous experiences with blended teaching, where teachers enrich their face to face courses with online activities. The sudden shift faced many challenges such as rejection, lack of technical skills, but there has been a generalised will and determination to overcome all the challenges. International collaboration and international students' mobility have been completely stopped, with students going back to their home countries. International research projects have also been affected.

So far, the Ministry of Education has not directly supported universities, decisions were left to each institution to deal with its needs and circumstances: if on the one hand this approach guaranteed an important layer of flexibility, on the other it increased existing disparities and inequality among universities. The major current challenge is the lack of training to properly teach online, to conduct exams and assessment, not to mention lab sessions or practical lessons. In addition to that, the impossibility of accessing the internet for a significant number of students and the unavailability of digital devices represent clear barriers. Digital justice, equity and equal opportunities were important issues that need special attention from institutions, especially for students from disadvantaged areas, in addition to providing access to students with special needs. Practical courses and assessment of students' work continue to be a big challenge when working in an online learning mode. In light of that, the major opportunity for the future is to anticipate future jobs and to redesign university programs accordingly, embedding digital technology into teaching and learning in a systematic way in order to enrich learners experience and empowering future teachers with the needed skills to meet the needs of digital learners.

Syria

In Syria, all public and private universities were closed for different periods during the pandemic, alternating lockdowns with moments of activity across campus. Very few private universities have been teaching remotely through the pandemic while others have stopped teaching completely. The Arab International University, thanks to its experience which was strengthened during the pandemic, has started gradually implementing online learning activities and has provided regular training opportunities for its teaching staff. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Higher Education in Syria is not yet recognizing online courses, which will delay the trend and limit the growth of distance and blended education. Also, no direct support from the Ministry of Education has been provided to universities to face this crisis.

Syrian universities face several challenges related to the traditional teaching method, the lack of experience of teachers in supporting active learning, and the weak digital competencies of key faculty members. Thus, the main opportunity that could have an impact on the higher education system in the future is the shift towards blended learning and the promotion of active learning through online activities. Finally, sharing best practices from other HEIs who work within a similar environment would be a good thing through which we can present a successful experience for Syrians to embrace.

Tunisia

In Tunisia, schools and universities have been closed throughout the pandemic, classes and research activities have stopped and there has been almost no mobility of students and academics since March 2020. Some students in mobility have been repatriated and negotiations to release scholarships have been started for those who remained. Notably, engineering students, in collaboration with their professors, have utilized their laboratory equipment to produce masks to support national effort to cope with the pandemic. The Ministry of Higher Education has been encouraging the use of distance education practices in order to ensure pedagogical continuity, especially since dedicated platforms for distance education were available but very underused. University organised intensive training sessions for professors related to the use of these platforms. During the pandemic, the [Virtual University of Tunis](#) (VUT), which offers courses via distance learning, made its platform, content, and pedagogical expertise available to other universities in Tunisia to help them move their courses online. An estimated 110,000 students have already signed onto the VUT online learning platform to take classes, with the involvement of around 18,000 professors. Moreover, several University Councils have been organised with the Minister to discuss the state of play and the difficulties encountered by universities.

The major challenges that universities are facing are related to the generalised resistance to change by many faculties members when it comes to updating their teaching methods, the students unequal access to the internet and to appropriate equipment: many students have not attended online courses because they lack these basic conditions, lack of quality digital content to support webinars and online courses, and finally the skepticism of faculty unions towards the use of e-learning platforms since these imply further effort on the part of faculty which is not financially compensated. In the future, the Tunisian higher education system would harness the covid19 experience by accepting that some courses (or at least part of certain courses) could be organised in an online or blended fashion. From this perspective, the Ministry of Higher Education is invited to release some laws so that it would be possible that some courses will continue to take place remotely. This would be quite adequate and in line with the efforts done to develop the dedicated platforms.

Stories of resilience from the UNIMED community

This section collects and presents some of the “COVID resilience” stories posted by the UNIMED members in the webpage <https://onlineresilience.uni-med.net/>.

University of Évora's COVID-19 Testing Unit

By Marta Laranjo, Senior Researcher, and António Candeias - Vice-Rector for Research & Development and Coordinator of the COVID-19 Testing Unit, University of Evora

The University of Évora's COVID-19 Testing Unit was created in April 2020 as an immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemics by bringing together the resources and expertise of the university in the field of molecular biology and biochemistry from different research units and making them meaningful and accessible for the benefit of the population of Alentejo Region. Since then, the University of Évora (UEVORA) has been carrying out COVID-19 RT-PCR detection tests and contributing to the increase of the response ability of the National Healthcare System and Social Security System. With an average capacity of up to 300 tests per day and having performed to this day over 14,000 tests, it has been supporting, on one hand, the regional healthcare system, public entities, private companies and the population in general, helping monitoring outbreaks, and, on the other hand, institutions supporting the elderly in the region. The COVID-19 Testing Unit operates with the support of the São João de Deus Nursing School, from the University of Évora, which carries out the collection of samples and the sampling logistics, connecting with the regional stakeholders. The COVID-19 diagnostic tests are carried out by a team of professors and researchers from several UEVORA research centres from inactivated viral particles, thus avoiding contamination risks. The extraction of the viral RNA is performed with manual and automatic extraction kits and the identification is carried out by real-time PCR using methodologies validated by the National Institute of Health Dr. Ricardo Jorge (INSA).

The UEVORA has promptly embraced this challenge as a duty to the whole community to collaborate, and even more of the scientific community and its research centres and the researchers involved in this Unit are highly motivated and committed to do their best, directly contributing to help mitigating the COVID-19 pandemics. Complementarily, the University of Évora COVID-19 Testing Unit is performing an epidemiological study of the academic population of higher education institutions in Alentejo, including the University and the two Polytechnic Institutes, based on immunological and rapid antigen tests and aiming to assess the evolution of the disease within the academic community and understanding the social dynamics that allow the virus to spread within it. Finally, in January 2021 the unit has raised its expectations by achieving a 3 years funded project, the ARCO project - Alentejo Region Applied Research for COVID-19, which will allow not only the upscale and sustainability of the infrastructure into a permanent facility with the capacity to respond to the needs of the region in terms of future pandemics, but also to create a strong research program in the fields of microbiology and health.

Making Online Teaching Work: Insights from American University in Cairo Faculty

By Maha Bali and Hoda Mostafa, American University in Cairo, Egypt

This year has been an exceptionally challenging one for students and faculty alike, with disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the abrupt pivot to online education worldwide. Starting from the New Chalk Talk newsletter, Maha Bali and Hoda Mostafa from American University in Cairo have been asking faculty members from across the university for insights on this challenge inspired by student feedback the institution had been soliciting: How might we find simple strategies that work well for faculty and enhance the student learning experience? Nearly 20 faculty members from multiple schools responded to our questions about student stress and anxiety, engagement, and online instruction practices.

See the full article here:

<https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2020/11/making-online-teaching-work-insights-from-american-university-in-cairo-faculty/?lbsf=true&id=44651>

Leading a university through a pandemic: the experience of the Universitat de Girona

By Alicia Betts, International strategic projects, Universitat de Girona, Spain

The Universitat de Girona (Spain), like all higher education institutions across the world, has been forced to rapidly adapt to the expansion of the COVID19 pandemic and its consequences on daily life. The Spanish Government declared the State of Alarm on March 14th and has extended it until the 26th of April 2020. What will happen after the 26th of April is still very uncertain. The leadership team of the Universitat de Girona (UdG), from the first signs of the crisis, has taken on a proactive role to ensure the continuity of the university activities in whatever scenario the crisis would lead to. The first step taken was to create a Crisis Cabinet with members of the leadership (Vice-Rectors) and Heads of management, communication, international relations and occupational health. This Crisis Cabinet has the following functions: agree on decisions related to the impact of the COVID19 on the university community, coordinate the internal and external information and communications and identify the different scenarios that the university would be facing and design appropriate responses to each of them.

Six scenarios were identified: Preventive and reactive activity, Reduction of the physical presence at UdG, Suspension of teaching activity, Universitat de Girona closes (all activity goes online), Prolonged closure of the UdG, Return to the classroom activity. Each scenario has specific indications for teaching activities, research activities, student life and all the university services. Returning to classrooms will not be immediate. UdG knows the constraints can last for weeks and can be prolonged for months, most likely until the end of the academic year and could even be beyond. This scenario poses prolonged confinement, so the numerous activities that UdG had already begun to establish remotely (teaching, research, services, and administration) will likely continue to be carried out non face-to-face for the next months. Therefore, the challenge is a major one: to turn what has been exceptional so far into usual. This will require a huge effort and commitment from all the members of the Universitat de Girona community.

PTUK experience of the Remote Learning Plan during COVID-19

By Yasmeen Abuhasirah, Palestine Technical University, Palestine

With this sudden shift away from the classroom in many parts of the globe, some are wondering whether the adoption of online learning will continue to persist post-pandemic, and how such a shift would impact the worldwide education market. At Palestine Technical University, there was already a growth and adoption in education technology, it was before the COVID-19 epidemic. But we will continue to follow the eLearning emergency Plan that has been in place since the initial closure in March as our Remote Learning Plan. We will continue to use this plan for as long as the distance learning continues. There are, however, challenges to overcome. Some students without internet access and/or technology struggle to participate in digital learning; this gap was seen but we cannot overcome due to the economical war especially with regard to workers and the sources of income of thousands of families in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Our primary focus at this time is to ensure that we are doing everything we can to support our students in this new remote learning environment. We will continue to evaluate our current situation as we develop plans for our eventual return, and we will keep our stakeholders informed as such plans are developed.

Go Online: The Only Option for An Najah National University

By Saida Affouneh, Deputy President for digitalization and elearning, An Najah National University, Palestine

Like all around the world, An Najah National University in Palestine had to close due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis. The university's risks management committee discussed the consequences of such a closure for the students and decided to take the challenge of continuing the learning process against all odds. The eLearning center committed itself to this mission, and developed an emergency plan with different scenarios. It created a task force team to work on achieving this effectively, while addressing all expected challenges and opportunities. One week was dedicated to planning and preparation, and then the university leadership announced the starting date of online learning. Infrastructure, human capacities, learners' readiness, University rules and regulations' flexibility, quality and accessibility were the main factors to consider while planning. On the first day of online learning, more than 80% of the students joined; which slowed down the system, breaking down for a few moments. This challenge was expected and dealt with quickly, by updating the servers, and increasing their capacity.

The eLearning center was established in 2012 with the mission to build human capacity in technology, pedagogy and assessment, in addition to the development of hundreds of blended courses and recorded lectures. Exclusive online courses were not an option since ANNU adapted convenient education as a system. However, it did not preclude the development of many open courses nor the inclusion in the MOOC's community though the publication of 50 Open courses, two MOOCs and 10000 recorded lectures. Besides, ANNU was part of the OpenMed project that enabled the team to develop and share open resources under the umbrella of UNIMED. Although Moodle was the official Learning management system for online learning, many other tools are used such as ZOOM, Big Blue Button, Facebook closed pages, and WhatsApp. Faculty members are given the choice to meet their students through the tool of their choice. Weekly reports are completed and daily technical support is offered to students and staff, while training workshops are conducted according to teachers' needs. Technology gave us the power to continue teaching and learning online. The university will continue to find ways to be able to achieve digital justice for all learners.

Conclusions and way forward

The national snapshots and the stories collected in this Occasional Paper show, on the one hand, that South Mediterranean higher education systems have been able to guarantee some kind of continuity to their educational offer despite the severe lock-down measures, by putting in place online teaching strategies. On the other hand, the pandemic has confirmed the fragility of the South Mediterranean university ecosystem and has made evident the gap between education systems that already have robust strategies, competences and solutions to deliver remote learning, and those that do not. Beyond well-known disparities in internet connectivity and devices availability, a whole set of additional gaps become evident, first and foremost the capacity of university educators to deliver engaging and meaningful online learning experiences.

Existing social and digital exclusion dynamics have been exacerbated during the pandemic, as well as concerns about surveillance and data privacy resulting from dependency on online solutions. Also, as new norms in online teaching and learning are being discussed in most of the policy circles of the region, the risks are that quick fixes and emergency solutions adopted by universities become the new norms. On the contrary, the global higher education community is realising that the pandemic can bring an unprecedented innovation potential for university systems, and that the “new normal” will surely be more digital. As noted by the International Council of Distance Education², the biggest lesson learned during the pandemic is that online learning can be an effective and affordable complement (and in some cases an alternative) to traditional face-to-face learning.

How this will translate into more inclusive or elitist systems will depend on the policy decisions that will need to be taken in the very near future. Beyond the predictable adoption of blended models for teaching and learning, Mediterranean countries have in fact the opportunity to rethink their higher education systems by grounding them on renewed capacities of educators and innovative pedagogies, ultimately improving the relevance of the higher education system within the society at large.

UNIMED, the Mediterranean University Union, is committed to support this transition towards a new normal where digital technologies can be used to make university systems more equitable, efficient and sustainable, working with South Mediterranean universities, governments and stakeholders to make sure that the innovation potential that has been uncapped in an emergency mode during the pandemic can represent the starting point for a real inclusive and sustainable innovation wave in the region.

² See 2021 ICDE Report “Global quality perspectives on open, online and flexible learning 2020”, <https://www.icde.org/knowledge-hub/quality-network-report-2021>

This Occasional Paper presents the results of a survey launched in May 2020 among Presidents/Rectors, Vice Presidents/Vice Rectors and Offices of International Relations of UNIMED member universities in the Southern Mediterranean, aiming to better understand how universities have been reacting to the pandemic and which innovative solutions have been put in place. The survey results have been updated and enriched by the members of the UNIMED SubNetwork on eLearning and Open Education, and have been enriched with a selection of the inputs collected by UNIMED through the online platform “Online Resilience - A collection of Online Learning Stories during COVID-19”.