



Institute for the  
Development of Education



# The impact of COVID-19 on higher education: a review of emerging evidence

NESET Analytical Report (Farnell, S.Matijević, S.Schmidt, 2021)

**Nino S. Schmidt**

**Co-Chair of the BFUG Working Group for Social Dimension 2018-2020 and 2021-2024**

**Institute for the Development of Education (IDE), Executive Director**

Zagreb, Croatia

SIDERAL, PLA – Student life during and post COVID-19, 21 May 2021, 10,15h-11,15h



## Content

1. **Immediate impact** (now) of COVID-19 on the social dimension of higher education
2. **Short-term impact** (next academic year) of COVID-19 on the social dimension of higher education
3. **Medium-term impact** (up to 2025) of COVID-19 on the social dimension of higher education
4. **Conclusion**



1.

**Immediate impact (now)  
of COVID-19**

**on the social dimension of higher education**



# Immediate impact of COVID-19 on the social dimension

- **At-risk students will be disproportionately affected.**
- **COVID-19 crisis is exacerbating pre-existing education disparities**, rather than causing those disparities.
  - Now at-risk students **face a range of additional challenges** in accessing higher education, participating fully in their study programs and successfully completing their studies.

(NESET Analytical Report, Farnell et al., 2021)



## State of play: US-based survey on students (May-July 2020), Chirikov et al., 2020)

- **35 % of undergraduate** and **32 % of graduate students** screened positive for **major depressive disorder**
- **40 % of all students** screened positive for generalised **anxiety disorder**
- Groups more likely to be affected by depression were **low-income** and **working-class students, LGBT students** and students who are **caregivers to children or other adults**



## State of play: Arizona State University – survey on students (Aucejo et al., 2020)

**Lower-income students, racial minorities and first-generation students** experienced larger negative impacts on the academic outcomes compared to their peers:

- While 13 % of all surveyed students planned to delay their graduation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, **lower-income students were 55 % more likely to delay graduation** than their more affluent classmates
- **Non-white students** were **70 % more likely** to report **changing their study course** compared to their white peers
- **First-generation students** were **50 % more likely to delay their graduation** than students with higher educated parents



## University responses: University of Strasbourg

- Identified 160 students whose **lack of materials** (computer, internet connection) jeopardised their ability to continue their studies remotely as well as pass their exams.
- The university and its foundation consequently **set up an Emergency Fund** for these students and raised €61,000
  - helped to **distribute more than 100 computers** to students in need
  - it is currently trying to find a solution for the students who do not have an internet connection.





## University responses: KU Leuven

- **Online sessions on mental well-being**, on themes such as worrying, addiction, the body (sleep, breathing, moving and listening), supporting each other, stress and self-care.
- Psychologists of the Student Health Centre, together with KU Leuven's main student organisations (LOKO and STURA), provide an **online resilience training for students**.
- Accessible and anonymous **online chat organised three times a week** by KU Leuven student support staff.



2.

**Short-term impact**  
(next academic year)  
of COVID-19

on the social dimension of higher education

## State of play: UK - survey by the Sutton Trust (Montacute and Holt-White, 2020)

### 1. Reduced equal access to higher education

University **applicants from working-class backgrounds** were:

- **twice as likely** to have insufficient access to the internet, devices for learning or a suitable place to study, compared to those from middle class homes.
- more likely to be **worried about the negative impact** of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of **getting into their university of choice (51 %)** compared to middle class applicants (43 %).
- **more likely to have changed their mind about attending university** than more advantaged applicants.

## State of play: UK - survey by Wonkhe, 2020

### 2. Increased chances of drop-out of at-risk students

- Significant proportion of students are **considering dropping out (12.6 %)**, rising to around one in five among disabled students and students from state schools.
- Over half of the survey sample reported feeling lonely on a daily or weekly basis. The **risk of dropping out was much higher for students who had lower levels of satisfaction** with their student experience: compared to the average of 12.6 % of students considering dropping out, the rate was 31.5 % for students who felt lonely and isolated.



3.

## **Medium-term impact**

(up to 2025)

of COVID-19

on the social dimension of higher education



## Medium term impact on the social dimension (up to 2025)

Pandemic will have **negative impact on equity and social inclusion in pre-tertiary education >>>** creating a knock-on effect of:

- a) **reducing equal access** to higher education
  - b) Increasing **risk of dropping-out**
  - c) **lowering the level of participation** of at-risk students in higher education in the upcoming years.
- Long-term **‘scarring’ effects** for young people under the age of 25 – the ‘COVID generation’ – resulting in an **unprecedented decline in social mobility** due to rising economic and educational inequalities.



## Medium term impact on the social dimension (up to 2025)

Additional research and analysis will be needed to better understand the future impact of COVID-19 on the social dimension of higher education, particularly **through collecting, monitoring and analysing trends** related to:

- **enrolment** in higher education
- the **transition time** between leaving the regular school system and entry into higher education
- how higher education is entered: alternative **access routes** vs standard access route
- **drop-out, duration of studies, and completion** in higher education
- demand for **various modes of study**: part-time studies and short-term programmes vs full-time study.



## Medium term impact on the social dimension (up to 2025)

- Despite the negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic on higher education, it is also important to consider **what opportunities the crisis provides** to place the **social dimension as a top priority** in the post-COVID-19 recovery in higher education.
  - Provides an opportunity **to place the inclusion** of underrepresented, vulnerable and disadvantage groups **as a top priority** in the efforts to address the disruption caused by COVID-19





## 4.

# Conclusion

- Each **public authority and higher education institution** must **adopt context-specific interventions** to address the challenges for social dimension caused by the COVID-19 pandemic
  - since their challenges and needs differ depending on the context in which they operate



# Thank you for your attention!

## **Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt**

Co-Chair of the BFUG Advisory Group for Social Dimension 2018-2020 and 2021-2024  
Institute for the Development of Education (IDE)

Zagreb, Croatia

[nscukanec@iro.hr](mailto:nscukanec@iro.hr)

[www.iro.hr](http://www.iro.hr)

**BFUG Working Group for Social Dimension:**

<https://ehea.info/>