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IO4. Policy and Practice Guidelines for Integrating eLearning in Higher Education

Policy Recommendation Report

An abridged version



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Executive Summary

The report that follows is an attempt at a thorough account of the methodology, findings, conclusions, and recommendations following the national research studies conducted in all partner countries comprising the consortium of the Erasmus + OnlineHE project, i.e. Romania, Cyprus, Lithuania, Greece, Spain, and Serbia. The research goal was to identify the methods used in the process of implementation of online education, including the methods applied in the emergency remote teaching period.

The report represents a comprehensive picture of the current state of affairs in higher education in the above-mentioned partner countries concerning the manner of organising and implementing distance learning, with a special focus on the period of COVID-19 lockdown and the impact it had on the process of higher education. The report was compiled based on the conducted research, whereby the researchers resorted to a threefold method of data collection: a) desk research, b) a checklist questionnaire, and c) interviews with policymakers and educational stakeholders.

The research aimed to utilise different but equally relevant perspectives to identify the existing policies, strategies, practices and experiences when it comes to the implementation of full online teaching and learning, with special emphasis on the COVID-19 emergency period and the sudden and complete transition to online education. The results revealed through the research and presented within this policy recommendation report will serve as the basis for overall policy guidelines for integrating eLearning into higher education, at the level of project partner countries but also hopefully on a broader European level.

The overall research at the level of all partner countries revealed that distance learning was not a new concept in higher education in partner countries before the COVID-19 pandemic. Higher education institutions had resorted to some types of distance learning even before the pandemic, to a greater extent in some partner countries such as Cyprus and Lithuania, and a lesser extent in some other partner countries such as Serbia and Romania. However, there were no prior practices of fully online education at the level of higher education institutions, and in that respect, it is a general stance that higher education in partner countries was not entirely ready for the sudden and complete transition to fully online learning. Neither students nor the staff had the full scope of adequate skills to make the transition seamless. However, it is encouraging to learn that all parties in this process learned valuable lessons and made efforts to make the most out of the newly created circumstances. The valuable responses obtained from relevant





interlocutors reveal potential paths that higher education institutions could take when it comes to the form and content of integrating eLearning across universities.

The research conducted within this intellectual output revealed some important aspects of the sudden and complete transition to online education at the time of the COVID-19 emergency, the way that online education and distance learning, in general, were perceived before and after the COVID-19, as well as potential paths and directions of further developing and upholding eLearning in higher education. Even though there is slight resistance towards fully online courses, higher education institutions in all partner countries appear to be aware of the inevitability of online education in the future, and it is on the way of searching for the perfect formula to find the right balance between traditional and electronic learning.

The comprehensive version of the Policy Recommendation Report is available at the following link: <https://onlinehe.eu/>





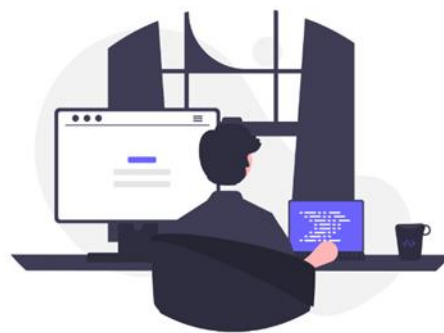
1. Policy Recommendation Report – Methodology and Purpose

During the COVID-19 lockdown period, more than 90% of higher education students and staff in Europe and around the world switched to fully online lectures. Needless to say, everyone was taken aback by the new circumstances. Most higher education institutions, staff and students alike, were simply unprepared for such a sudden and complete transition to online learning. Consequently, the higher education community is faced with the necessity to urgently address the issue of online education in terms of perceiving it as an important aspect of education in the digital era and adopting and implementing adequate policies and strategies to integrate e-learning across the university.

The aim of the research conducted to generate the policy recommendation report was to determine the current policies, strategies, approaches and practices in the field of distance learning and online teaching in higher education institutions in all partner countries. The research was based on a mixed-method approach, and it comprised threefold data collection techniques:

1. Desk research
2. A survey: distribution of a checklist questionnaire
3. Open-ended interviews with policymakers, and educational stakeholders

The desk research was performed to identify and analyse the existing national legislation which advocates and supports the development of online higher education in partner countries.



When it comes to field research, i.e. the distribution of a checklist questionnaire, the consortium teams resorted to the eLearning readiness checklist developed as a part of the Erasmus +





OnlineHE project. The readiness checklist was based on the European Commission's [the SELFIE tool](#). The list was adapted for this research, the questions were translated into partner languages and structured in the form of online questionnaires (Google Form) to be distributed by e-mail to potential respondents. They were distributed in the period between November 2022 and January 2023 to higher education partners and associates in partner countries to reach the necessary responses among HE stakeholders. We resorted to this particular sampling method due to the limited time to conduct research and a strong need to obtain responses in a short time. The items in the checklist questionnaire inquired into respondents' experiences regarding the distance learning strategies and practices at their respective HEIs during the COVID-19 lockdown until now, the involvement of HE staff in the process of defining strategies, procedures and directions of their HEIs about distance learning, rights and responsibilities of all parties involved in the process of distance learning, advantages and disadvantages of distance learning at HEIs in partner countries, the capacities of HEIs and their leaders in partner countries to conduct full online teaching and learning process, the readiness of both staff and students to engage in the process of full online teaching and learning, etc. The statements were either presented in the form of a 5-point Likert scale (frequency and usefulness) or nominal scales (yes, no, I do not know). A minimum of 20 respondents was required per country to fill in the distributed questionnaires. The data were analysed by resorting to an inductive approach using descriptive statistics.

Last but not least, open-ended interviews were organised in the period between November 2022 and January 2023. Project partners identified potential interviewees by taking into consideration the quality of relevant responses that could be obtained from persons identified for this segment of the research. The researchers approached the potential interviewees by either approaching them directly or by sending an informative email and inviting them to participate in the research. After obtaining their consent, the researchers organised the time, place and form of respective interviews.

The interviews included semi-structured questions in partner languages and were conducted either online or in a face-to-face conversation with policymakers and educational stakeholders. The results were interpreted by resorting to narrative analysis.





3. Conclusions and Recommendations

The transition to eLearning during the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the academic community's attitude towards online learning, i. e. it has prompted a rethinking and updating of long-established teaching and learning practices.

When it comes to the institute of distance learning before the COVID-19 pandemic, one can assert based on the conducted research studies in all partner countries that higher education institutions were not particularly ardently engaged in this form of learning, even though in the majority of partner countries there were accredited distance learning study programmes.

However, the practical implementation of distance learning programmes was not in the focus, nor was it enthusiastically embraced even though it was high time for higher education institutions to welcome the digital era into their classrooms and practices. This is especially true for full online learning courses, bearing in mind that even before the COVID-19 pandemic distance learning was, according to studied sources, mostly equated with the concept of hybrid learning, and less with the concept of a complete transition to online teaching.

With the outbreak of the pandemic, the situation changed overnight and higher education, like all other levels of education, had to adapt to the new circumstances. In that respect, the legal framework was no longer an issue, since every higher education institution (with or without accredited distance learning programmes) had to switch to fully online learning. What was found to be one of the major deficiencies in the system of higher education was a lack of detailed strategies, rules, instructions and practices in partner countries which would make this sudden transition to online learning a bit more seamless. Nevertheless, the situation required a quick reaction and all participants in higher education had to invest efforts to mitigate the effects of the pandemic as much as possible and prevent the complete cessation of educational activities at HEIs.

In that respect, the respondents participating in the research interviews and the surveys agree that the transition to digital learning during COVID-19, regardless of all the obstacles and difficulties, was extremely important for attenuating the consequences of the pandemic and maintaining the continuity of education to the extent that it was possible. Thus, the transition to full online education was eventually functional, mostly due to the enthusiasm and adaptation abilities of the staff and students who directly depended on the speed of adaptation to the new situation.





The main difficulties imposed by the sudden transition to online education recognised in different partner countries by the research participants were as follows:

- The lack of thoroughly developed long-term distance learning strategies with precise instructions for distance learning in higher education, i.e. insufficient legal regulation that clearly defines principles, goals, use and protection against abuse, etc
- The reluctance of teachers to accept the inevitability of the application of digital technologies;
- Difficulties encountered in the attempt to adapt the teaching methods and materials for remote application;
- Insufficient levels of digital knowledge and skills in teachers
- Lack of technical and pedagogical support
- Lack of a concrete and official legal definition of methods of assessing students' knowledge and behaviour in the online environment
- Significant differences in terms of capacities between different higher education institutions (big universities offered better conditions and adapted more easily to the new circumstances, while colleges, academies and vocational colleges generally encountered much larger difficulties in adapting to the new situation).

Bearing in mind the identified obstacles and difficulties concerning fully online education and distance learning in general, it is possible to single out the most valuable recommendations:

- Developing competence for meaningful, creative and responsible use of digital technologies;
- Harmonising learning content and digital tools, taking on new roles;
- Adjusting the way of monitoring and evaluating students
- Re-organization of study programmes, which includes: new goals and outcomes, adequate contents and activities with the use of digital technologies, a new approach to digital evaluation and quality assessment; regulating the ethical and safety aspect of digital learning; reconsidering one's own attitude towards technology;
- Providing higher education institutions with ICT infrastructure; creating digital teaching content and materials; changing the approach to learning (learning through research, problem solving, critical thinking); training all participants in the use of different software tools; practicing



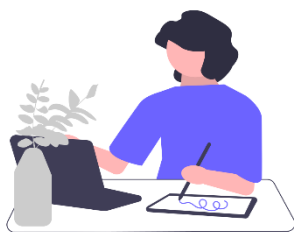


different activities that take place without physical gathering (networked communication and interaction, interpersonal communication, simultaneous realization)

- Providing students with the support they need to succeed in online courses, including academic advising, tutoring, and technical assistance
- Online courses should encourage interaction between students and instructors, as well as among students, to create a sense of community and foster a collaborative learning environment.

Furthermore, defining distance learning strategies in higher education institutions requires the following:

- alignment with the educational policy,
- reconceptualizing study programmes in relation to the way of learning, the relationship between teaching and practice, establishing the realization of practical teaching, the pace of students' work, the use of modern teaching methods, etc.
- establishing a solid connection between the pedagogical and technological aspects of distance education; pedagogical (didactic-methodical) design of online classes (harmonizing content and digital tools, enabling co-construction of knowledge, organizing problem-based and cooperative online classes, discussions, debates),
- designing programs, seminars, workshops that will contribute to improving the development of digital competences of teachers/students and increase the quality of distance learning,
- greater investment in the technological equipment of higher education institutions, their availability and accessibility to all,
- partnership and professional networking that higher education institutions establish between themselves and with other institutions to exchange good practice and learning,
- continuous review of efficiency through established indicators.





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