

148 Inequalities in higher education experiences during COVID-19 across Europe

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Based on an EU-funded Horizon project on the impact of COVID-19 on socioeconomic inequalities, we focus on individual narratives across Europe - with an inequality lens - that experienced higher education COVID-19. The pandemic influenced access to learning, learning experience and digital skills, but also outcomes.

The swift transition to online learning and virtual learning environments created many challenges related to digital skills, access to equipment and materials for online learning, and participants critically reflected on the ways in which the new teaching environment did not always meet learner needs and was often misaligned with the capabilities of students and teachers. Learning outcomes, employment outcomes and wellbeing outcomes seemed to be worsened over the pandemic.

Despite the negative implications of the pandemic, there were some better stories and opportunities that provided valuable lessons so that all stakeholders (individuals, higher education institutions, HE systems) can be more prepared in future times of crisis.

Full paper

The COVID-19 pandemic had profound, long lasting and multifaceted impacts upon the experiences and outcomes of Higher Education (HE) across Europe. According to the United Nations (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented disruption to education systems worldwide. It has impacted approximately 1.6 billion learners and 63 million teachers across all levels of education and training in over 190 countries on every continent. The transition from traditional forms of learning to online environments necessitating digital skills, access to equipment and materials to support learning created many challenges, and highlighted the stark inequalities in the capabilities of not only individual children and their families, but HE providers and their systems of work.

We draw upon data collected and analysed in the EU-funded RESISTIRÉ project, which aims to understand the unequal impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak and its policy responses on behavioural, social and economic inequalities in 31 countries (EU27 plus Iceland, UK, Serbia and Turkey). The project was conducted by a multi-disciplinary consortium of 11 partners from 9 European countries with expertise on quantitative and qualitative research on inequality, intersectionality and gender.

Within this framework, we focus on 48 narratives across Europe - from a gendered perspective - that experienced HE during COVID-19 and identify common patterns. More specifically, we address the following three questions:

1. How inequalities shaped the experiences of students in HE during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. To what extent have students' experiences during this period influenced their future perspectives on education and employment?
3. What strategies have students in HE across Europe employed to cope with the changes brought about by the pandemic?

While it was widely recognised that the transition to online learning was an adjustment for everyone in HE, there are specific disadvantages that arose in those who suffered from intersectional inequalities. While the university learning experience was disrupted due to closures, there was also a significant lack of support from wider education systems, especially for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. Many did not have the appropriate digital equipment required, and had to rely on utilising smartphones and data or communal devices to access lectures and seminars. Students also discussed that they had limited digital skills to begin or continue their learning successfully, and some found this affected their ability to perform to their full potential. Teachers and students alike had to quickly pivot to new platforms and ways of teaching and learning which took significant time and effort, and was not conducive to effective learning in some cases. The learning environment was sometimes particularly challenging for students at home due to a lack of internet, inconsistent internet connection and/or absence of a dedicated work space. Furthermore, due to their home environment, some participants found it difficult to balance learning with domestic tasks and struggled with interpersonal issues such as unstable family relationships or the threat of domestic violence. These issues were particularly striking during periods of lockdown where students were often forced to return to their family homes and respect stay at home measures.

Learning outcomes were also negatively affected by the pandemic due to not only lack of access to appropriate equipment, but impacts on the quality of teaching. In particular, participants noted how the lack of physical interaction with other students meant they felt isolated in their learning and could not freely share ideas and engage with one another. Opportunities for training, internships and work experience were also severely limited, as was the ability for postgraduate students to undertake fieldwork. Postgraduate students reported that in some cases their studies had to be extended or placed on hold, affecting their future career opportunities and their entry into the labour market. Employers were also recruiting fewer or no new staff, which made transitions from HE to work far more challenging and delayed opportunities for independence and movement.

The closure of higher education institutions also had a significant impact on mental health, as many students felt isolated and lonely, often causing issues of anxiety and depression. The move to online formats also exposed some students and teachers to forms of digital violence such as online harassment, and little support was offered to combat these concerns.

Conversely, the removal of physical interaction for some limited their exposure to bullying and violence from classmates, and therefore was seen in a positive light. There were also other 'better stories' in the move to online HE, such as those who discussed the pandemic as a period of self reflection and growth, and those who enjoyed being able to work from home.

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