

## Higher Education Institutions in times of COVID-19

During the COVID-19 crisis, higher education Institutions (HEIs) **have actively deployed innovative initiatives to cope with the COVID crisis**. There are a rich wealth of examples of HEIs contributing personal protection equipment, researching vaccines and treatments, loaning facilities and supporting local businesses and communities. All the while, institutions themselves have fundamentally adapted their teaching as millions of students transitioned from face-to-face to online learning.

Notably, **HEIs have swiftly stepped in and provided support to their communities**. Engagement went beyond the diffusion of scientific knowledge and the collaboration with the health sector has benefitted towards the development of various vaccines. HEIs had public interest at their heart collaborated with non-profits (such as food banks) and made their physical space available to the public needs (dormitories for self-quarantine, “makers’ space”).

HEIs can also develop and contribute to the expertise of regional actors by sharing new knowledge with their local communities (such as citizens, civil society, business and public institutions) as well as by fostering global research and innovation networks for a better post-pandemic world. This includes finding solutions that contribute towards global grand challenges, including sustainability and inclusiveness. Throughout the past year, **HEIs have undertaken knowledge exchange more innovatively than before**. Some HEIs have also adopted a role for the community to develop activities and provide comfort to students and citizens during lock-downs. From sports activities online tutorials to surveys to understand changing behaviours and needs as a way to promote well-being amongst student, staff and the community, HEIs have swiftly stepped in and provided support to their communities.

During the ongoing recovery phase of the pandemic, HEIs have been important providers of the skills and innovation. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating the trend towards digital economies and societies. Consequently, the need for digital skills and infrastructure is further accelerating. For instance, COVID-19 crisis has **exacerbated some inequalities amongst students** particularly regarding the access to broadband connection to follow online courses and download study material. This inequality reaches developed countries like the United States and Croatia and even more so developing economies.

The pandemic has also exposed the need to equip students with competences to cope with complexity, adopt problem-solving abilities, and combine inter-disciplinary knowledge. In other words, to adopt an entrepreneurial mind-set. The crisis has shed light on a **need for a solid organisational structure within and for HEIs**. There are good examples of ad-hoc coordination bodies’ set-up to respond to crisis

Conversely, **HEIs lacking a solid organisational structure might struggle in the face of the pandemic**. The emergency measures adopted so far (engagement with local community, scientific and economic research projects, online teaching) should continue. HEIs may also take the opportunity to undertake more of these engagement initiatives in the aftermath of the crisis.