



ESTONIAN QUALITY AGENCY FOR HIGHER AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

How did higher education institutions cope with the forced distance learning from March to June 2020

Summary

October 2020

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Introduction

In October 2020, the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA) conducted a survey on how higher education institutions (HEIs) coped with the so-called forced distance learning under the COVID-19 pandemic, and what kind of support they would expect from the state. The questionnaire (see Annex) was distributed to vice-rectors for academic affairs and heads of office of academic affairs of all universities and professional higher education institutions in Estonia. The following HEIs submitted their written answers: University of Tartu (UT), Tallinn University of Technology (Taltech), Tallinn University (TLU), the Estonian University of Life Sciences (EULS), the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (EAMT), the Estonian Business School (EBS), TTK University of Applied Sciences (TTK UAS), Tartu Health Care College (Tartu HCC), Tallinn Health care College (Tallinn HCC), Estonian Aviation Academy (EAA), Estonian Military Academy (EMA), Pallas University of Applied Sciences (Pallas), the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences (EASS), the Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences (EUAS) and the Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary (BMTS). The Estonian Academy of Arts (EAoA) took the opportunity to answer the questions through a focus group interview.

The questionnaire was divided into the following sets of questions:

1. Teaching staff
2. Students
3. Study process and support services
4. Successes and challenges
5. What changes have you made or plan to make to forced distance learning in the current cycle compared to the previous one?
6. What kind of support would you expect from the state?

It is noteworthy that many universities had already conducted a similar survey, including UT, TLU, Taltech, EAA, and Pallas.

To avoid any ambiguity arising from the concepts used in the questionnaire, its replies, and this summary, the definitions of the terms used are provided below.

Face-to-face learning – teaching is provided in a classroom.

Distance learning – a form of remote education, where students are physically separated; can be organised as blended or online learning.

Forced distance learning – distance learning due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Contact learning – teaching and learning with learners and teacher (lecturer, trainer) interacting simultaneously; contact learning can take place in a classroom, online or in the form of flexible learning with some learners in the classroom and some online.

E-learning¹ or digital learning – using digital tools for teaching and learning. E-learning or digital learning can be set up as face-to-face, classroom, blended, flexible or online learning.

¹ For the purpose of the questionnaire and its replies, the term “e-learning” refers to online learning.

Flexible learning, also **hybrid learning** – a form of contact learning with some students present in the classroom and others joining online.

Blended learning – tuition is organised as a mixture of face-to-face and online or flexible learning.

Online learning – the entire process of teaching and learning takes place over the internet.

Independent learning with online support – the lecturer assigns tasks that students work on independently (such as working with web-based study materials or watching pre-recorded video lectures or reading chapters from a book) at the beginning of the course, and assesses their performance at the end of the course without any interaction in between.

The HEIs' responses are summarised below, following the order of the sets of questions.

1. Teaching staff

When Estonia declared the emergency situation, HEIs found themselves at different stages of developing e-learning and online learning, and thus their preparedness for the transition to distance learning also varied. While Taltech, for example, had online learning resources for all subjects and Moodle was used as a single platform, the EAoA lacked both distance learning courses and a harmonised approach to e-learning platforms.

Regardless of the level of preparedness, most HEIs experienced an increased work-load for teaching staff as they moved to distance learning. The BMTS estimated that work-load as much as doubled, EAoA and Pallas also mentioned a drastic increase in work-load. TTK UAS was the only HEI stating that work-load either remained the same or was even reduced because *“a lack of direct contact meant less small talk with both colleagues and students.”*

The reasons cited for increased work-load included:

- Lecturers who replaced contact learning with online learning, had to acquaint themselves with new ways of working (recording video lectures and carrying out online seminars), and at first it was more time-consuming than continuing with conventional lectures and seminars.
- Additional communication with students (new arrangements, tasks, etc.).
- Students wanted to communicate more with the teaching staff as well as with fellow students, and this meant additional consultations.
- More written assignments meant more time spent on assessing and giving feedback.
- New ways of learning practical skills and assessing learning outcomes remotely had to be found.

The answers revealed that the increase in work-load depended on the lecturer's previous experience – *“transition to online learning was easier for lecturers who already felt at home with digital tools”* (EBS).

Both EAoA and Pallas highlighted that the teaching staff who struggled most were those of more practical art subjects *“whose current teaching methods were based on contact learning and who now demonstrated remarkable creativity and solved some seemingly impossible teaching tasks.”* (Pallas)

The work-load of teaching staff in health care colleges also increased because of an increased work-load outside the HEI as many of them work in health care institutions.

After a few months, regular work-load was restored and lecturers started to focus more on the benefits of distance learning, such as time saved on commute, greater flexibility of time use, and other.

Online learning and independent learning with online support were used as teaching methods. Today, many HEIs offer flexible or hybrid learning.

In music education, recordings were used for practical tasks (e.g., the student makes a recording of playing the instrument, uploads it, the teacher listens to it and gives written feedback). (EAMT)

What all faculties had in common was that many lecturers preferred online consultations provided both one-on-one and in groups. Generally, most of them tried to mix things up so that students would not get bored by reading books or slides on their own (although lecture slide sets for individual learning were the third most frequently used approach). (Taltech)

For the transition to online learning, lecturers needed the most help with the following topics and activities:

- Creating a Moodle course.
- Choosing and using the teaching and assessment methods best suited for remote learning.
- Conducting webinars and pre-recording video lectures.
- E-tests, e-exams and defending of theses online.
- Setting up hardware.

Several HEIs mentioned that lecturers merely needed moral support and encouragement. At the beginning of the lockdown, HEIs prepared (multilingual) guidance for teaching staff and put together “support teams”. However, supporting external teaching staff was mentioned as a challenge.

We prepared guidance materials for academic staff on various learning platforms and tools (e.g., Moodle, MS Teams, pre-recording of lectures, electronic exams and electronic theses defence). (Taltech)

An in-house peer support group of seven members was established, each of them providing individual support to lecturers assigned to them during the spring term. Each member of the support group trained (introduced the opportunities, made test lectures with) the assigned lecturers and took part in all their online lectures, ready to step in should any technical issues arise. The lecturers were also advised on methodological issues, such as how to adjust the formerly planned learning activities to remote learning, when to take breaks, how much time should be allowed for virtual team-work, and other. In addition, individual training was organised on creating tests and exams in Canvas. Instead of monthly meetings, we had weekly online ones to feed into the communication and motivation of academic as well as other staff. The lecturers found all the necessary information and guidelines from the Canvas Lecturer Guide course used for that purpose already before and accessible to all lecturers. (EBS)

There is a strong need for support related to e-learning. In early summer, we started recruiting e-learning support persons from our current staff in academic units. Today, we have more than 60 people who received training in August and now, in addition to their regular jobs, offer support to their peers. (UT)

What also helped, were the pre-recorded webinars published on HITSA website for learners and teachers/lecturers. External staff working under an authorisation agreement who had no prior experience with distance learning needed extra guidance. In addition to education technology and IT support, they were helped by the HEI's academic staff. (Tartu HCC)

Although, as a general rule, the teaching staff was well-equipped with technology, on some occasions the HEIs had to lend them computers, headphones, cameras, etc. What also caused problems was the insufficient and unstable internet connection that disrupted teaching and learning. The EAoA noted that there were not enough Zoom licences for unlimited use and therefore, lecturers had to share them.

The staff and lecturers could take university devices home (computers, monitors, cameras, microphones, keyboards, mouses). The teaching staff whose home internet was too slow for online lectures/meetings were given 4G routers. (EBS)

Our policy on the staff was that if anyone needed something to ease their work and teaching, we would buy it without further ado. We bought laptops, monitors, keyboards, headsets, webcams, etc., for use by lecturers. (BMTS)

Most HEIs offered prompt technological and methodological support to their teaching staff. Only EMA found that support was rather insufficient.

The general impression was that the school did not provide much support. A lack of common approach seemed to be the main problem; no guidance, help and information was provided for teaching and learning. There was little to no support and assistance by the school in organising teaching and learning. (EMA)

2. Students

Student feedback about their studies during the lockdown varied and was somewhat contradictory. Some students highly valued the flexibility and an opportunity to learn from home, while others found the format of distance learning to be unsuitable altogether. Student satisfaction depended on the IT capabilities of the teaching staff and the nature of the subject. For example, at UT, satisfaction was higher among students of social sciences and humanities and lower among those of natural and exact sciences as well as medical students. The situation was quite similar at Taltech where engineering and natural sciences subjects received a lower score. Apparently, more experienced students coped better while it was more difficult for first-year students. According to all HEIs, what students missed most was direct communication with lecturers and fellow students, they also struggled with self-management, i.e., finding the motivation and meeting deadlines. The students of EASS would have wanted more feedback from their teaching staff. A concern for the students of TTK UAS was also the multitude of various platforms and reduced apprenticeship opportunities. Nonetheless, students were generally quite satisfied, and they especially complimented the HEI's ability to move to online learning so quickly. Many students found that in the future at least the theoretical lectures could be mostly provided online.

The lockdown was a completely new situation for students, too, and the most positive feedback was that the HEI as a whole had coped very well with rearranging and continuing

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teaching activities. Both lecturers and students were very understanding. Students highly appreciated that several subjects continued in the form of contact learning, although online via various platforms, and that lecturers preferred to deliver lectures and webinars over the internet and not as e-learning in the format of independent work. Of course, There was also negative feedback and the main issue to highlight here was that there were, however, some lecturers who resorted to their comfort zones and opted for independent work instead. Another complaint aired by students was that lecturers failed to share information about the organisation of studies in advance, meaning the students received information very last minute, e.g., about when a lecture or a webinar would take place. (EULS)

There were those who faced difficulties due to distance learning (41% of the respondents), as well as those who enjoyed it a lot as it gave better opportunities to plan and take time to concentrate (39% of the respondents said it was easy to move to distance learning); students found that e-lectures and webinars that enabled direct communication with the lecturer and fellow students supported distance learning the most. According to the June survey, 91% of students estimated that they coped well with credit tests and exams on digital platforms. Almost half of the students would be ready and willing to see a larger share of e-learning in the future. (Tartu HCC)

Some students found e-learning to be very suitable because of its flexibility (lectures were recorded, i.e., could be watched later) and convenience (e.g., no need to commute from out of town). Students missed face-to-face communication and discussions they would have had during physical meetings. For many students, the social aspect of studies is essential and therefore, not having it dampened their enthusiasm and motivation. Students also found that they become tired more quickly during virtual lectures as compared to conventional classes. All in all, the swiftness and speed of moving to e-learning seemed to be a positive surprise for the students. (EBS)

Students liked it very much that, over time, more lecturers made delivered online lectures. It helped them progress in the more difficult subjects – moving forward at their own pace, rewinding, solving exercises or skipping the already familiar parts. Indeed, while students encountered problems during distance learning, their overall attitude remained positive and many said that near to nothing changed for subjects that had good online support to start with. (Taltech)

Students gave positive feedback about courses where the lecturer gave feedback, continued to have regular face-to-face meetings online or prepared thorough video lectures. The courses where the lecturer gave little feedback, there was no direct contact (for example, the only means of communication was email), assignments were poorly formulated and it was difficult to reach the lecturer received more negative feedback. Creative and flexible solutions were admired. The keywords being communication, sharing of information, and feedback. (Pallas)

The majority of HEIs estimated that the work-load for students increased, especially so at the beginning when they had to adapt to new platforms, timetable, etc. At the beginning, the lecturers were unable to estimate the work-load and according to students, they were overwhelmed by independent work.

TTK UAS and EAA found that the work-load for students stayed the same. According to EAoA and BMTS, the work-load remained the same, while the “life burden” and emotional pressure on students increased. It was particularly difficult for students with families as they had to share their time and digital devices with their school-aged children.

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The burden on students certainly increased with the move to distance learning, primarily on account of independent work. On the one hand, it is good to see that the university did not lower the bar in terms of quality while allowing flexibility in studies, such as adjusting deadlines. On the other hand, for many students such flexibility meant not having the habitual routines and might have caused their work piling up. (EULS)

Based on a survey conducted at TLU with 527 respondents, 43% of them perceived a higher burden, while another 43% said the burden remained the same. (TLU)

Some students quite enjoyed distance learning – they were able to plan their time better and save time on commuting. However, others complained that there were more written assignments and sitting behind the screens for a long time was tiresome. (EAMT)

Rather increased a little. The increased work-load for students was partly attributable to lecturers' lack of knowledge – it was difficult to estimate how time-consuming some independent learning activities were, and lecturers feared they would not be able to cover everything, so students were overloaded with the material. (EMA)

What students needed the most, was emotional and psychological support from the teaching staff and fellow students, as well as the latest information about the organisation of studies. Some students did not have the necessary devices or a proper internet connection.

The HEIs provided all possible support in the form of individual or group consultations, guidance materials and information letters. Psychological counselling was also available, although the UT, for example, did not witness a higher demand for it than before. The HEIs supported students by extending deadlines, postponing graduation to August to make sure there is time for practical training, or other. EAoA made an exception, allowing to complete practical training after defending the final thesis. Private higher education institutions postponed the term of payment of tuition fees for students facing financial difficulties. If needed, students could borrow laptops. At the UT, the student council was responsible for providing computers to students. At the EAoA, the support staff handed the entire computer class equipment out to students. EAoA confirmed that all devices were returned intact and in good condition. For EAMT, one of the problems was that students did not have high-quality musical instruments at home or in the dormitory. Therefore, it was difficult to practice and participate in video lessons. Attempts were made to find a solution and try various forms of study.

Weekly newsletter ensured that students stayed in a shared information space, and a newly created FB group helped to stay cheerful and preserve a sense of community. We organised virtual tea evenings with the rector, webinars for departments and consultations for students in their final year who had to reorientate in drafting their thesis and prepare for defending the thesis virtually. (Pallas)

At most HEIs, dropout rates did not increase during the spring term. Voluntary withdrawal showed a downward trend (EAMT). The EAoA saw more students graduating than it had had for several years. The reasons probably lied in the fact that students focused more on their studies, since all entertainment facilities, bars, clubs, etc. were closed. At TLU, the number of students removed from the list of students fell, while the number of students starting academic leave, rose. EULS noted a somewhat higher dropout in the fields of study that previously had a larger share of classroom learning. The only HEI with a slightly higher dropout rate was EMA, “probably first and foremost

because of increased responsibilities due to COVID-19. Many had to rearrange some aspects of their work, while others had to focus more on taking care of their children. On top of that, all the technical issues and requirements.”

According to six HEIs (UT, TLU, EAoA, EBS, BMTS, Taltech), the students’ academic progress (grades) tended to improve. TTK UAS, EAMT, EASS and EUAS said they had not analysed it, and Tartu HCC, Tallinn HCC and EAA had not noticed any changes in that respect. EULS and EMA observed that grades tended to fall, especially in subjects for which distance learning had previously not been a habitual form of study.

Possible reasons for better grades:

- Part of a long-term trend not related to the lockdown (UT).
- Use of alternative forms of assessment which:
 - were suitable for online studies (UT), or
 - might not have been the best for measuring the achievement of learning outcomes (TLU).
- Pass/fail assessment was used instead of differentiated assessment (for more complex subjects) (recurrent).
- Possibly more cheating because it was not possible to monitor all exams (recurrent).
- The teaching staff being more lenient with students during the difficult times (recurrent).
- Being isolated, students were able to concentrate and think their projects through more carefully (EAoA).

3. Study process

While the studies generally continued according to the usual weekly timetable, completing practical work or apprenticeship was postponed to autumn by almost all HEIs. For many HEIs (e.g., UT, EAMT, EAoA, BMTS) it translated into postponing the defending of theses and graduation.

According to EAoA, sticking to the previously agreed study plan alleviated the insecurity and anxiety of both students and teaching staff.

EAoA and Pallas offered to take home any materials needed for practical work and all unfinished work. Some lecturers continued with practical training virtually – *“some more successfully than others”* (EAMT). EAA used virtual tours and simulations, where possible. Also, practical work was done over Zoom, although TLU found that the diversity of practical experiences suffered. More students at Tartu Health Care College opted for using the accreditation of prior and experiential learning (APEL) in completing their study programme.

During the lockdown, materials and tools were delivered to the EAoA reception for students to pick up. For example, in ceramics, the works made at home were collected for firing in the EAoA kilns. However, most of the practical work started after the spread of the virus had reduced, from May to July. It was possible because the period of defending theses was postponed, with the second part of it taking place as late as in August. (EAoA)

Practical work that could in one way or another be done remotely was indeed done remotely. However, other solutions were also used, such as hybrid learning, where some students were

physically present and some participated from home or tasks were distributed among groups of students so that while one group was physically at the HEI, others worked from home (sometimes the activities were filmed). (EULS)

All practical training took place as usual and in the planned volume. The majority of practical classes were postponed, to take place in June and with some study groups in July and August. Where possible, the postponed practical classes were replaced with theory classes from the next year's programme. (EASS)

4. Successes and challenges

We also asked HEIs to highlight the key problems and successes related to forced distance learning.

First, the **successes**:

- A boost for digital development. (UT)
- The number of fully (100%) online courses has dramatically increased. (EBS)
- Digital competencies of teaching staff improved (recurrent).
- Teaching staff gained confidence for conducting e-learning. (EBS, EAoA, EULS, BMTS)
- It was possible to involve experts, including foreign experts in the studies, that would otherwise have been impossible. (TLU, EBS)
- Closer cooperation between teaching staff, planning the studies together, participating in colleagues' virtual lectures. (TLU, EULS)
- More efficient use of time. (TTK UAS)
- More appreciation for the work of people in IT and IT-related fields in general (EULS)
- Learning outcomes were achieved according to the planned timeline, and students graduated within the standard period of study. (Tartu HCC)
- An opportunity to try new solutions, do things that would not have been required under normal circumstances, the lecturers had to make an extra effort, and they said it was beneficial. (Taltech, EMA, Tallinn HCC)
- Recorded lectures were useful for students, as many of them work and were now able to choose when to watch the lectures or repeatedly go over the more complicated or unclear parts. (Taltech)
- Having a sense of shared responsibility, understanding that both the lecturer, as well as the students, have a role to play (e.g., students were more enthusiastic than before about independent work). (Taltech)
- Many students were more active in online consultations than they would have been in physical classroom meetings. (Taltech)
- Students' presentation skills improved. (Pallas)

Challenges:

- Apparently, the first-year students with less skills in independent learning and experience with university studies than those in senior years, struggled most during the lockdown. (UT, TLU)
- A considerable increase in the work-load of the teaching staff and enormous mental distress due to having to guarantee the continuity of studies under entirely unexpected circumstances.

The main issue was the allocation of resources at home – attending Zoom lectures while other family members had their own Zoom or Teams meetings at the same time. (e.g., Tallinn HCC, Tartu HCC, EBS, EAA)

- Some lecturers felt that during a conventional lecture they got some of the energy back from the students, while delivering online lectures during the spring term was like talking to a “black hole”. (EBS, Taltech)
- At the beginning of the transition to distance learning, there were some problems with sharing of information, i.e., students were not informed or received contradicting information from various sources – information about how tuition in a subject is organised, or about any changes, moved slowly or came from many sources simultaneously. (UT, EULS)
- Online classes were not inclusive enough. (TLU, EMA)
- Concerns relating to external teaching staff – preparing someone for the job who might already be replaced next year. (EAoA)
- Additional costs incurred by students and teaching staff (upgrading internet plans, phone bill, devices, and other). (Tartu HCC)
- The HEI’s infrastructure proved to be insufficient for conducting online learning. (TTK UAS)
- Unstable internet connection in home settings. (Tartu HCC)
- Postponing practical work. (e.g., UT, EAMT, EAoA, EBS, Tartu HCC, EAA)
- Problems with trusting the integrity of students during exams and credit tests. Students even tried to use study materials during oral exams. (EMA, UT, TLU)
- Too much work on the computer was exhausting, especially for the eyes. (Taltech)
- Since we use licensed software for academic purposes and students use it in our computer labs for their projects, it was sometimes difficult to grant remote access to such software. (Taltech)
- Social and emotional isolation of both the teaching staff and students. (recurrent)

In summary, all HEIs coped very well with the transition to distance learning. According to EAoA, the key to success was the fact that the term had already started and the study groups and working routines were well in place.

5. The impact of lessons learned in spring

For the autumn term 2020, all HEIs have moved back to contact learning. Only EUAS will continue distance learning with their international students. Several HEIs mentioned wanting to avoid full-scale distance learning in the future as much as possible (UT, TLU, EAoA). EAoA’s strategy would be not to close the university completely, at least workshops shall remain open for students. Nevertheless, the COVID-forced distance learning has led to making essential changes.

The HEIs repeatedly mentioned using flexible learning, with some students physically in the classroom and others joining online (UT, Taltech, TLU, EAA, EBS, TTK UAS, Pallas, EAMT, EAoA, Tallinn HCC). In EBS, for example, the flexible learning option is compulsory as of this term. At the same time, HEIs were quite critical towards this teaching method, partly because of having little experience. It was also said that the share of flexible learning has increased (EMA, Pallas).

Assessment methods have also changed, e.g., pass/fail assessment is used instead of differentiated assessment, and the methods have been adjusted to the needs of e-learning (UT, TLU, Tallinn HCC).

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More technical devices have been acquired, the teaching staff has undergone training in e-learning. There is more online support available for various subjects, whereas in some HEIs it is a must for all subjects to have online support (e.g., Taltech, EULS, Tartu HCC). The HEIs that used to use various study platforms have now moved to a single e-learning platform (Moodle – EAoA).

To prevent the spread of diseases and the resulting full-scale online learning, several HEIs now require the use of face coverings (e.g., EAMT, EAoA).

To be able to provide face-to-face tuition for as long as possible in the form of seminars or practicums where it is absolutely essential, we will take the following precautions:

- 1) STAY AT HOME IF YOU ARE ILL.*
- 2) PRE-RECORD VIDEO LECTURES and make them available to be viewed on-demand.*
- 3) IF A SEMINAR AND PRACTICAL TRAINING IS PRE-RECORDED, only participants registered for the subject have access to it. No one else is allowed to record the seminar or practicum.*
- 4) DISPERSE LARGE GROUPS. With more than 30 participants, use distancing measures so that the room is filled up to 50% of its full capacity. The possibility of hybrid learning.*
- 5) WEAR FACE COVERINGS AS A PRECAUTION. If pre-recording is not technically viable or reasonable due to content or it is impossible to observe social distancing between participants wearing a face covering is obligatory. It is the obligation of students to bring their own face coverings.*
- 6) REGISTER ALL PARTICIPANTS. (UT)*

At the moment, EAMT is working almost as usual. People wear face coverings during lectures and seminars. The teaching staff have been advised to be flexible and offer hybrid learning where possible. Teacher training on e-learning has been conducted. One part of it concerned practical (music) tuition, the other was aimed at lecturers of theoretical subjects. In a number of classrooms, we are setting up a high-quality audiovisual streaming system, LoLa. It will allow us to organise both international masterclasses and provide high-quality musical instrument tuition with a teacher in one and a student in another room of the HEI. We believe that the EAMT is now much better prepared for a potential forced distance learning period than last spring. (EAMT)

In addition to the existing teaching method, there has to be a back-up method in place, in other words, online support and e-learning option for every subject. We started preparing for the autumn term earlier, knowing that with the virus still there, we will face the need for distance learning again. What is now different from spring is that teaching and learning are much better planned and prepared. All parties now have prior experience, better IT knowledge and skills. (EULS)

Blended learning will also be used in the future, even without an imposed obligation to do it, because it helps develop students' autonomy and self-management (in master's studies). (EMA)

What is more, while previously we used to have only a couple of fully online courses each term, this term we have 18. (EBS)

6. What is expected from the state:

The HEIs expectations can be divided into the following areas:

- 1) IT-related training and sharing of international best practices, including
 - a. introducing various digital learning methods, assessment, identification and ensuring integrity (TLU)
 - b. additional training on distance learning for the teaching staff, similar to courses previously delivered under the PRIMUS programme “Learning and teaching in HEI” that all beginner teachers received (Tartu HCC)
 - c. training on e-learning and flexible learning (EBS, EMA)
- 2) Purchasing hardware and software, including
 - a. compensation for the investments made in 2020 to upgrade technical capabilities (UT, Taltech, TLU, EULS, EAMT, EAoA, TTK UAS, Tartu HCC, Tallinn HCC, Pallas)
 - b. joint tenders (*major tenders in the field of e-learning to be organised together to pool competencies in preparing tender documentation and to attract better bids – Taltech*)
 - c. licensing and software (e.g., Adobe, Proctorio) (recurrent)
- 3) Stable and sufficient internet connection across Estonia (recurrent)
- 4) A national IT support centre for all HEIs in Estonia (Taltech, BMTS)
- 5) Shared handling of the aspects of data protection (UT, EASS)

A central network bringing together specialists on e-learning in higher education would be helpful. For years, HITSA has successfully coordinated a network of general and vocational education schools. Higher education, however, has somewhat fallen out of the scope of HITSA’s and INNOVE’s activities (training, conferences, and other). Partly because higher education was somewhat left aside, the Association of Educational Technologists became more active again and has been trying to coordinate networking but as the work is voluntary and unpaid, not much progress has been made.

Centrally organised seminars and joint study trips would be particularly useful. We could follow the example of the Archimedes Study in Estonia programme and the way they have promoted the Estonian higher education system on foreign markets.

As for the infrastructure, universities could organise major tenders in the field of e-learning together, to pool competencies in drafting tender documentation and attract better bids. There is an urgent need for exam proctoring platform Proctorio. (Taltech)

We would appreciate state’s support for purchasing access to research databases and for taking measures to adjust the rooms for video streaming and recording (soundproofing). Also, we need additional funding to upgrade IT capabilities (conducting blended learning; microphones, cameras, and other). It would be important to take a centralised approach in terms of rooms and technology. We look forward to standardised solutions (i.e., technical specifications and demo versions) that would facilitate creating a high-quality infrastructure. It is difficult to conduct a lesson in Zoom in a large classroom, so there is a need for a central, standardised and evidence-based concept that can be used as a basis for the planning of future classrooms. (Tallinn HCC)

Summary

All HEIs in Estonia had to move teaching and learning from classrooms to online in an extremely short time due to the COVID-forced lockdown in March 2020. The HEIs themselves find that they were successful even though the starting point in terms of capability varied largely from HEI to HEI. For example, Taltech already used a uniform platform, Moodle, and had online support for all subjects. In contrast, EAOA had neither any online subjects nor a shared approach to digital learning platforms. The key to success in moving to COVID-forced distance learning was the fact that the term had already started so study groups and working routines were well in place.

All in all, the subjects and the defending of theses were completed as planned. Since practical training and apprenticeships mostly had to be postponed until the end of the term or to summer, then in many universities graduation also took place in August. The dropping out did not seem to increase during the spring term, and academic progress (grades) rather improved. It is possible, that lecturers were less strict or that it was easier for students to cheat in online tests, or quite the contrary, they were able to focus better because all entertainment facilities, bars, clubs, etc. were closed. At the same time, it was more difficult for people with families to concentrate on their studies as they had to share their time and devices with their school-aged children.

An increased level of digital competencies of teaching staff, professional IT support and tighter collaboration were mentioned as successes. The biggest challenge for both the teaching staff and students was social isolation, potentially exacerbated by problems with information sharing, internet signal strength, time management, and other. The work-load of teaching and IT support staff increased considerably as the lockdown began. In the words of the vice-rector for academic affairs of EAOA, you can only take this kind of pressure once in a lifetime: *it was like a war and everybody mobilised themselves in the fight against a common enemy.*

Today, the situation in HEIs is more or less back to normal. Contact learning is prevailing, but much more online support is available than previously. Many HEIs use flexible learning, although they are quite critical towards it. The HEIs that did not yet have a shared approach to digital learning platforms and methodology, have now started to use Moodle and adjusted it to fit their needs best. Assessment methods have been modified, new technology has been bought and training have been provided. All HEIs are now in a better shape for online learning than in spring, but they would like to avoid moving fully to distance learning. They would prefer the opportunity to carry on with contact learning, especially in more practical subjects. To prevent the situation faced in spring, most HEIs have established a rule of maintaining a safe distance and/or wearing face coverings.

From the state, HEIs would expect IT courses and sharing of international best practices, joint tenders for hardware and software, compensating the costs incurred due to the emergency situation, establishing a national IT support centre, ensuring stable and sufficient internet connection and taking a common approach to solving data protection issues related to online examinations.

In conclusion, let us share a quote from the Tallinn Health care College:

We would like to note that the expression "forced distance learning" carries a negative connotation. /.../ In reality all teachers and students have been more than ready and inspired to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to complete their study programme. It has rather been a period of collective growth and advancement, and certainly not of forced labour.

Drafted by: Maiki Udam, project manager, EKKA

Annex. Questions for higher education institutions

How did higher education institutions, their teaching staff and students cope with the COVID-forced distance learning from March to June 2020

The Ministry of Education and Research in collaboration with the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA) is gathering initial information about how universities and professional higher education institution coped with the so-called forced distance learning² and what kind of support HEIs would expect from the state. Please submit your answers to the below questionnaire **by 15 October** to the following address: heli.mattisen@harno.ee. Upon request, we can conduct an interview based on the survey questions with you and your colleagues (up to eight persons). If you would prefer the interview, please let us know by 5 October.

A webinar introducing the results of this survey will take place on 29 October at 14-17 and all HEIs are welcome to share their lessons learnt so far in distance learning, and future plans. We are aware that several HEIs have already analysed how their students and teaching staff coped with the forced distance learning period and we would appreciate it if you agreed to share the results of such surveys with EKKA and/or discuss your experiences at our webinar. Please provide this information also by 15 October.

A more detailed study of the distance learning experiences of the teaching staff and students is planned for the beginning of 2021. The brief will be drafted and focus areas chosen in cooperation with higher education institutions.

Questions for HEIs about the forced distance learning:

1. Teaching staff
 - a. Did the work-load of teaching staff increase or decrease during distance learning? What is your answer based on and what could be the underlying reasons for such an outcome?
 - b. Which forms of tuition did your lecturers use the most (hybrid learning³, e-learning⁴, blended learning⁵, independent learning with online support⁶)?
 - c. What kind of support did lecturers need for the move to distance learning? What kind of support did HEI provide for the teaching staff without any prior experience in e-learning?

² **COVID-19** forced distance learning could be referred to as “**forced distance learning**” and it may take various forms (methodologically thought through e-learning, video lectures without direct interaction between the lecturer and the students, independent study and independent knowledge testing, etc).

³A frequently used form of distance learning is **hybrid learning**, where part of the group is present in the classroom and others join online. The lecturer will have to be able to consider the needs of both audiences and use suitable methodology.

⁴ E-learning or online learning is a form of distance learning where the lecturer conducts teaching entirely online and, among other things, gives individual feedback to students. As a rule, the interaction takes place lecturer-to-student, but also student-to-student.

⁵ Blended learning means partial distance learning, i.e., an approach to teaching and learning which combines e-learning and classroom learning (such as having a lecture online and seminars in a classroom, or other).

⁶ The lecturer assigns an independent task to students (such as working with web-based study material or watching video lectures or reading chapters from a book) at the beginning of the course and assesses their performance at the end of the course without any interaction taking place in between.

2. Students
 - a. What kind of feedback did students give to the courses conducted during distance learning?
 - b. In your estimation, was the work-load of students increased or decreased during distance learning? Based on what can you say that?
 - c. What kind of support did students need for the transition to distance learning?
 - d. Did the dropout rate increase or decrease during distance learning? What could be the possible reasons for one or the other?
 - e. Did the academic progress (grades) improve or worsen? What could be the possible reasons for one or the other?
3. Study process and support services
 - a. Did lecturers and students have the tools and solutions necessary for distance learning (computers, internet connection, access to e-learning platforms)? What kind of support did the university offer to teaching staff, students, support staff if any problems arose?
 - b. How were apprenticeship / practical work / practical courses organised?
 - c. How would you rate the study process delivery in general? Please indicate the key challenges and successes.
4. What changes have you made or plan to make to forced distance learning in the current cycle compared to the previous one?
5. What kind of support would you expect from the state (infrastructure, training, sharing best practices from abroad, or other)?

Thank you.