

Background document for brainstorming at the EMUNI 49th Management Board Session

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Introduction

The Covid-19 outbreak, which originated in China in December 2019, has since spread to most of the countries in the world and brought the world to an unprecedented standstill. At the time of drafting this document, more than 1.2 million people worldwide have been infected and more than 60,000 lives have been lost due to the virus.¹ We have witnessed transformational changes within weeks into a complete re-organisation of how we move, work and socialize.

The social and economic consequences of the pandemic will be severe, as well as its impact on the global order and stability. Many more sectors (like public health, education & research, international cooperation and the environment) will be impacted and these effects are still to be mapped. The effect of this crisis on advancing the digital transformation, a topic that has been extensively discussed lately, is another aspect that has to be studied. There is a strong sense that this event will represent a milestone in recent history and global affairs, after which the world will not be the same.

Objective

This background document outlines some of the key aspects that have been challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic with a view to understanding the impacts of the global crisis on higher education and preparing the EMUNI University for the next era. It is intended to guide the discussions along the EMUNI body meetings that are conducted via video-conference. At the centre of interest is EMUNI's capacity to respond to the new challenges, but the context to that is broad and involves the prospects of teaching in higher education and researching as well as the Euro-Mediterranean regional cooperation, and eventually a more general world outlook. Ultimately, the discussion will seek to answer the question: ***what are the emerging challenges and opportunities that EMUNI should respond to, the means and methods of addressing them and through which concrete activities?***

Preparation

Given the video setting of the meeting, we suggest to organise a discussion in a panel style, where every MB member prepares a short intervention (2-3 mins), highlighting the aspects that they deem significant for the purpose. To organise and facilitate the discussion, some key issues are outlined below, including a set of guiding questions to be

¹ The data is from 3.4.2020. Source: <http://who.int>

addressed. Not all the questions need to be addressed by each individual; everyone can choose to address only some, according to their preference. Following a round of interventions, a moderated discussion will be held before the decisions/recommendations are jointly formulated and adopted.

Issues to be discussed

1. Economy

The economic impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the world economy could be even worse than that of the 2008 recession, with expectations of a deceleration of global growth. The OECD estimates that for each month of containment, there will be a loss of 2 percentage points in annual GDP growth. The tourism sector alone faces an output decrease as high as 70%.²

The UfM predicts that the Euro-Mediterranean region in particular is expected to be among the regions most affected. From a global perspective, countries severely affected by the pandemic in the Northern Mediterranean, as well as countries in the Southern shore with high external debt or heavy reliance on oil exports or tourism will experience the socio-economic repercussions more intensely than others.

Interestingly enough, evidence from the Spanish flu outbreak shows that cities and places with earlier and tougher lockdowns had faster economic recoveries once it was all over. Some suggest also that the return of older people who had been laid off because of the coronavirus to labour force can help with the economic recovery. But this crisis may also put millions of people, especially independent workers and those working in SMEs out of jobs, exacerbating the already existing unemployment for youth, especially the more qualified or in emerging sectors, such as creative industries. Most economists agree that public money needs to help businesses regain their economic activity. There is a wide agreement that the crisis has revealed blind spots of the GDP as an indicator of development and that progress should be measured differently this time.

- Are economies going to continue being globalised and interrelated or will local supply-chains gain more prominence?
- How can we address and lessen the effect on further youth unemployment?
- What is the role of HEIs in addressing the economic crisis - and what can EMUNI do?

² UfM, The economic aftermath of the COVID-19: Devising actions for recovery, see <https://ufmsecretariat.org/economic-aftermath-covid-19-actions-recovery/>

2. Health

One of the most unsettling issues about the global crisis was that many countries did not have an adequate response system in place, despite various warnings that a pandemic was coming. Solidarity is being put to the test: on the one hand the vigorous containment measures are all due to solidarity towards the weakest ones in our societies, on the other hand, there is scope for more solidarity, especially across countries. At the same time, public healthcare is demonstrating its advantages over privatisation and reinforcing the value of this key principle.

- Has science failed in effective preparation for the arrival of the pandemic?
- What explains the ill preparedness of most of the countries? Is science a factor?
- What is the role of regional cooperation in research to address the scientific and non-scientific aspects of this, as well as future crises?
- In general, what is the role of HEIs in building the capacity of public and health care administrators to respond to future similar crises? And in specific, what is the role of EMUNI?

3. Environment

Lower economic activity and less traffic in cities due to the pandemic containment measures have had a positive impact on air pollution levels above cities. The COVID-19 pandemic has elicited a global response from governments and businesses unlike anything we have seen before. It is motivated by care, compassion, connection and an unheard-of pace of change. However, there are dormant crises that we know of. In 2016 The Lancet journal warned that if the global emissions continue at the predicted rate, public health in middle-income and low-income countries would be hit very hard, in particular those of China and India. In fact, the World Economic Forum predicts that the majority of most-likely risks for the next 10 years are related to the environment.

- Are the politicians able to consider the Covid-19 crisis as an urge to prepare their response to climate-related disasters?
- Can we expect a similar vigorous action to the challenges of climate change or biodiversity change?
- What are some of the cultural changes that can take place, which are beneficial for the environment?

4. Education

The coronavirus pandemic, with the closure of universities around the world, is disrupting education. Schools and higher education institutions have reverted to distance learning through online learning platforms. The challenge is that the capacities of teachers/professors for delivering online teaching are very different, and there is a large

gap in the use of online resources across institutions and countries. There are a number of [online platforms and tools](#) offered and many ad hoc trainings to conduct online teaching have been convened in the past weeks. However, an opportunity lies within the momentum that online education has recently received. It is believed that e-learning will drive the reform of universities in the coming era.

Another aspect of higher education that could witness changes is the choice of fields of study by students and programme offerings by institutions. It is expected that as a response to the crisis, certain topics might become more popular, e.g. Public Health, Public Administration, Epidemiology, Supply Chain Management, Crisis Management, Sustainable Development etc., leading to a transformation of the existing organisation of disciplines.

- Do existing online platforms adequately address [the qualitative targets](#) and capitalize on the opportunities offered by the digital transformation? Exactly how do they need to improve, if at all?
- What are the limitations of online teaching and learning that justify the classic teaching format? How much of conventional education can be covered by online learning? Which disciplines?
- Which fields/disciplines should EMUNI, in cooperation with its partners, pay closest attention to? What kind of programmes (Master vs professional certificate)? And through which methodologies (conventional vs online)?

5. Research

The outbreak of Covid-19 has rapidly mobilized big amounts of funding. Universities, research institutes and other R&D organizations across the world are also working hard researching how the disease can be stopped and how to mitigate its effects. Quick-response research programmes/fast track calls, open access publishing, international and interdisciplinary collaborations have suddenly [taken centre-stage](#).

- Should funds for rapid response become more standard?
- Is open science that the scientific community has advocated for in the past, likely to get a impetus/stay post-corona? What should be done to encourage that?
- Are there other ways in which digital transformation is impacting the conduct of research?

6. International Cooperation

International co-operation in research, education and innovation offers countries a channel to strengthen both the quality of research and to foster solutions to common challenges, such as environmental and natural disasters; global health issues; research and technology infrastructures (including ICTs). It also contributes to addressing societal issues such as migration and youth unemployment.

Sharing of data, knowledge and research outputs have become more crucial than ever to overcome the global pandemic. In this particular occasion, the common saying, “think global and act local” is very true. But, with the travel restrictions likely in place for some time, the expected economic recession and budget cuts, effective regional and international cooperation might become challenging unless it is transformed to other forms.

- What are the current and foreseen impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on regional co-operation in the area of research, higher education and innovation?
- Is scientific cooperation, like some other sectors, likely to become more decoupled from travel? Will visits to research labs and teams, and international conferences outside the countries, in part become replaced by online collaboration?
- Could the response to the COVID-19 offer opportunity to remove barriers to regional co-operation and integration in research and higher education among Euro-Mediterranean countries? Are there other forms, apart from digitalisation and use of technology?
- In light of the crisis, what should be the short-term and longer-term priorities for international co-operation in the Euro-Mediterranean region, both at the sector and thematic level?