



# Teaching online in Higher Education Institutions. Estonia

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## Background

The global pandemic of COVID-19 caused a major disruption in the educational systems around the world and some of the changes are likely to persist and change the status quo in academia and higher education. Worldwide response of higher educational institutions (HEIs) to COVID demonstrates great diversity depending on the local policies and resources.

In Estonia, nationwide full closure of physical campuses in 2020 lasted from March 16 to May 14 and from 14 to 31 December -- a total of 78 days, which is the average across 24 jurisdictions of the OECD. Higher educational institutions adopted their own policies, relying on distance learning as much as possible and allowing for exceptions only in the cases where it was necessary because of the nature of studies.

## Methodology

In October 2020, the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education conducted a survey among higher education institutions on how the so-called forced distance learning was coped with under COVID-19 conditions and what help was expected from the government. The questionnaire 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. This report has served as the basis of the analysis,

together with in-house reports from the University of Tartu, Tallinn University and Tallinn University of Technology.

## Key Findings

- All the institutional analyses put more emphasis on the distance aspect of learning, not its digital tools.
- Most HEIs found that the overall educational outcome was not significantly affected by the pandemic.
- Some HEIs saw new opportunities arising: more cooperation between teaching staff, planning the studies together, participating in colleagues' virtual lectures, engaging foreign experts etc.
- Changes in the students' learning experience depended on their programme, study year and age.
- Distance learning and teaching also caused increased workload for the faculty, including new health hazards (excessive screen time, psycho-social problems arising from feelings of isolation) that need to be better addressed in the future.

## Key Recommendations

- It is recommended that the students' learning and self-regulation skills be better supported, particularly in the first-year courses or as a dedicated class.
- It is necessary to adequately address students' anxiety and other mental health issues.
- HEI's teaching staff's digital competences must be understood in the wider framework of pedagogical competencies, as high-quality e-learning experience presupposes a special pedagogical repertoire, and this will need more time and dedicated effort to develop.

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