EASTERN PARTNERSHIP
Civil Society Forum

The impact of COVID-19 on access to online and offline education in the EaP countries

EaP CSF COVID-19 POLICY PAPER

#PrepareEaP4Health

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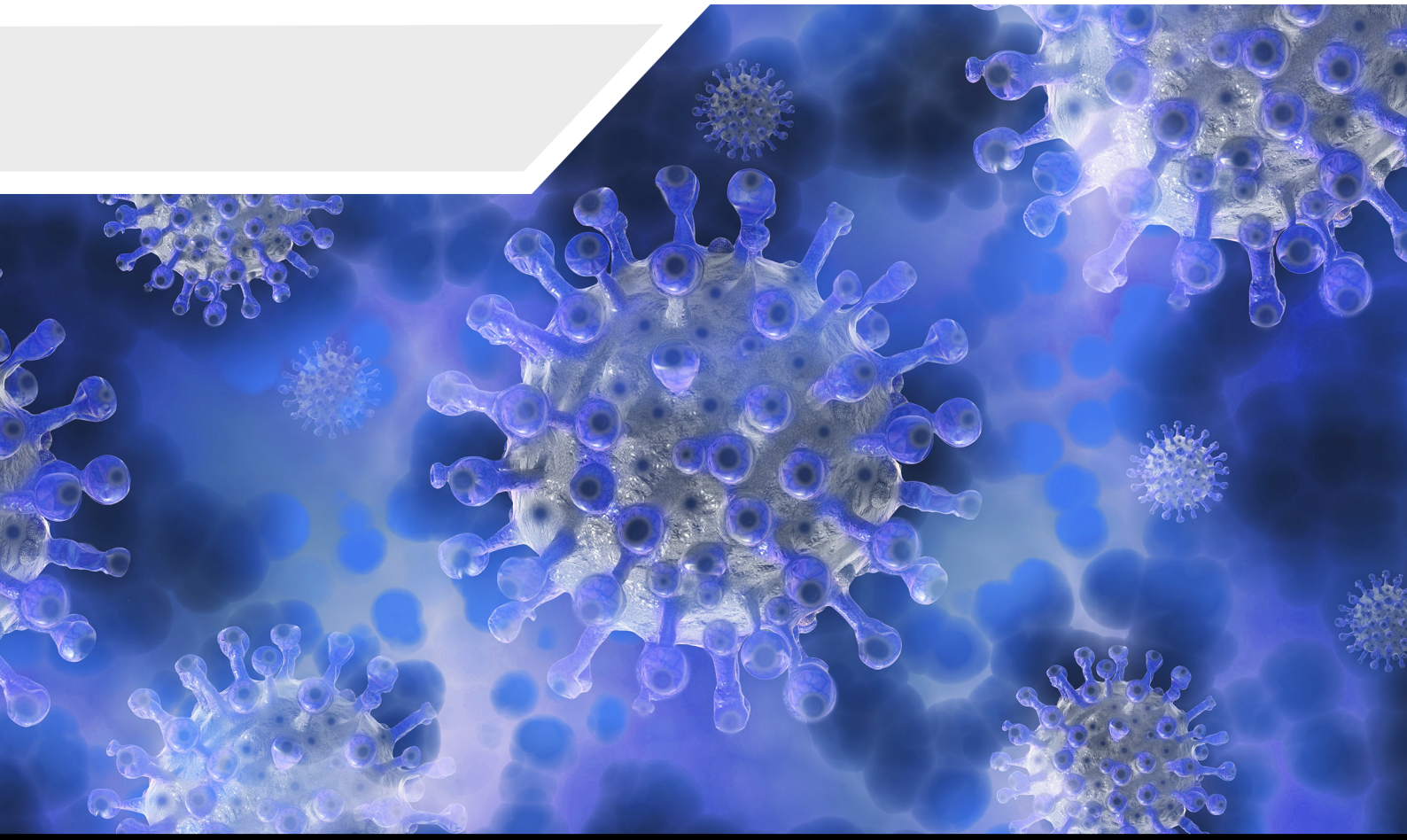

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EADTU	European Association of Distance Teaching Universities
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EaP CSF	Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ESN	Erasmus Student Network
ESU	European Students' Union
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
UK	United Kingdom
YEA	Young European Ambassador

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The researchers explored a range of issues associated with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Globally few if any countries have yet been able to assess the specific impact of Covid-19 on their education systems. No countries have yet experienced Covid-19 for a full academic cycle, and even in the most sophisticated education systems policy is responding in real time to circumstances as they emerge – and globally the pandemic is far from over.

In most if not all countries Coronavirus containment measures, like closing campuses, have precipitated a switch to emergency distance (i.e., online) education, a move which relies heavily on Wi-Fi and smart devices being universally available in all areas, rural and urban, of every country.

The researchers have identified **four headline conclusions:**

- Pre-Covid-19 underfunding of educational and technological infrastructure, combined with under-investment in teacher development and skills modernisation (especially for digital literacy and employability) has severely inhibited the region's capacity to sustain an effective educational experience for school pupils and university students during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated the disadvantage experienced by pupils and students already affected by socio-economic, geo-political and diversity marginalisation. For this reason, the researchers have considered the economic context for the region and each EaP country, and the distribution, affordability and reliability of Wi-Fi access and learning technology, as well as seeking youth testimonies.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has presented opportunities for innovation and an acceleration of digitisation in education and the economy. In particular, opportunities arise to overcome historical scepticism towards online, distance or 'open' learning. This could benefit the EaP countries, as experience from other systems proves that online or 'open' education can be helpful for developing more flexible learning pathways and improving equitable access to higher and life-long learning for underrepresented groups.
- Education is the basis for a strong, entrepreneurial, globally competitive economy. There is a circular interdependence between education and the economy such that stagnation in one leads to stagnation in the other. Strengthening investment in young people's skills and delivering quality education need to be further reinforced in the EaP countries for a sustainable post-pandemic recovery.

Specific recommendations flow from our analysis, in particular relating to funding and investment; professionalisation and modernisation of the teaching/lecturing profession; and national, regional and European collaboration and partnership. To sustain and enhance the educational opportunities of EaP youth during and beyond the Covid-19 crisis strategists, policy-makers, front-line educators, students, civil society NGOs, the EU and employers all have a part to play. Our recommendations (p.31-4) have been directed at these stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

In November 2020, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) commissioned an independent team of researchers to assess the impact of Covid-19 on access to online and offline education in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova (hereafter referred to as Moldova) and Ukraine.

This thematic paper is positioned within the framework of the EaP 2020 deliverables, specifically Deliverable 18 whose objective has been to "strengthen investment in young people's skills, entrepreneurship and employability". From this stance we address the following **research questions: What has been the main impact of Covid-19 on access and participation in online and offline education in the EaP countries? What groups have been most impacted? What mitigation measures have been taken so far and by whom?**

The paper is structured to:

- Present the team's methodology, as agreed with the commissioning team at the initiation of the project. In this section we also discuss the scope and limitations inherent in the project.
- Consider a range of contextual factors relevant to both pre- and post-Covid-19 educational experience and efficacy in EaP countries, including geo-political and socio-economic factors; digitalisation; teaching and education practices; and change agency. Where relevant we have drawn on comparative data and insights from across Europe and beyond.
- Specifically consider the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on access to education in EaP countries, with reference to educational and digital infrastructure and funding; digital skills of youth, their parents and teachers; employability; non-formal education; equity of access and lifelong learning. Where appropriate we have referenced comparative practices elsewhere in Europe and beyond.
- Identify opportunities for educational enhancement arising from the Covid-19 crisis.
- Present conclusions emerging from the study, and recommendations aligned to our findings and targeted at different stakeholders.

BACKGROUND

Endorsed in 2017 during the Eastern Partnership Summit, the 20 Deliverables for 2020 (European Council, 2017) represent an ambitious work plan which aims to improve the lives of citizens in the Eastern Partnership countries, while focusing on four key priority areas, namely: economy, governance, connectivity and society.

Of specific importance for this thematic policy paper is **Deliverable 18, whose objective is to "Strengthen investment in young people's skills, entrepreneurship and employability".** The vision behind this specific Deliverable is an ambitious one, as it proposes to bring into a cohesive framework the worlds of education, labour market, and innovation, such that investment in learners' skills would enhance their employability prospects, while contributing to an increase in the productivity and potential of the local economies. The rapid evolution of a global digital economy and the democratisation of knowledge through citizen-generated web content has amplified the significance of digital literacy skills for society and the workforce. This in turn places greater pressure on education

systems to prepare their graduates to actively participate and influence both society and the economy.

In the past three years, according to the progress reports, important milestones were achieved under Deliverable 18 in the EaP countries. As of September 2018 (EU Neighbours east, 2018), the first Eastern Partnership European School was launched in Tbilisi and all EaP countries got to have full access to the EU-funded Horizon 2020 programme. Also notable was the launch of the Young European Ambassadors initiative, intended to foster cooperation with youth organisations across the EU and the Partner Countries. The findings in this policy paper were, to a considerable extent, informed by interviews that the researchers conducted with Young European Ambassadors from the EaP region.

By February 2020 (EU Neighbours east, 2020), the EU4Youth programme became fully operational, having funded 100 projects on civic engagement and entrepreneurship, with 23,000 young people in the region having benefited from it. Also, through the Erasmus+ programme, 32,000 students and academic staff from EaP countries participated in academic exchanges; 46,000 young people were involved in other exchanges, trips and volunteering; almost 500 Master's students received an Erasmus Mundus scholarship; and nearly 3,000 schools and 7,600 teachers were connected via eTwinning Plus. Furthermore, all EaP countries have participated in a structural dialogue through the Torino process on Vocational Education reforms.

Although the success of these initiatives cannot be contested, according to both progress reports and consultations undertaken as part of this study, there are still aspects that require further work, funding and attention beyond 2020. For instance, and irrespective of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a need to further improve the quality and relevance of the education systems in the EaP countries, modernising pedagogical methods and increasing the employability of graduates. Further work is also needed to enhance lifelong learning. It must be noted that the very fact that Deliverable 18 was phrased in terms of solely *young people* does not prioritise lifelong learning as an objective under the framework of 20 Deliverables for 2020. Hence, there are a few objectives whose completion is still pending and which will be addressed more in detail in the following parts of the paper.

METHODOLOGY

Conduct of the research

Research for this thematic paper covered the six countries of the Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) and was conducted between late November 2020 and February 2021.

The paper draws on desk research and literature review, mainly from international organisations (such as the World Bank, UNESCO), national governments and international non-governmental organisations (such as the International Association of Universities, the European Students Union, the Erasmus Student Network) that released relevant data on the impact of Covid-19 on access to online and offline education around the world, including in the Eastern Partnership countries.

In order to consult the largest number of relevant stakeholders in the EaP countries, two surveys – one for institutional stakeholders (see Annex 1) and one for students (see Annex 2) were prepared and disseminated. The surveys were open between 9 December 2020 and 25 January 2021. The student survey was disseminated among the local chapters of the European Students Union (ESU) and the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) in the EaP countries, as well as via various Facebook groups. The student survey received 23 answers. The survey for institutional stakeholders was disseminated among the members of the EaP Civil Society Forum Working Group 4, being also posted on various online groups (such as the Eastern Partnership and the Young European Neighbours (YEA) network). Despite intense dissemination, this survey collected 16 answers.

To complement and substantiate the information received from the survey responses, follow-up, semi-structured interviews were organised, with respondents from the two surveys and with Young European Ambassadors from the EaP countries. Seven interviews were conducted with representatives from each of the EaP countries. Most of the interviewees were current or former Young European Ambassadors, educated in one of the EaP countries, therefore very familiar with the education systems in the region, through their own experiences and through their networks of current and recent pupils/students. Several of them continued their studies abroad (in an EU country or in the UK), which allowed them to draw a comparative analysis between the education systems in their home and host countries. The interviews took place via Zoom, lasting on average 1 hour each. The research team asked for the explicit consent of the interviewees to publish their identity (see Annex 4). All but one agreed to have their comments attributed.

The semi-structured interviews captured personal testimonies relating to the lived experience of learning and teaching during the Covid-19 situation. They allowed for comparability of information among the six EaP countries, while ensuring enough flexibility for individual contributions and insights. Interviewing Young European Ambassadors for this thematic paper was a central aspect of the methodological approach, given that the YEA initiative was established in June 2016 precisely as part of the "EU Neighbours east" project. Within the community of YEAs, the research team aimed to interview at least one YEA from each of the EaP countries, ideally a student or recent graduate, in order to capture a student-centred approach on access to online and offline education in the respective systems. Moreover, it was the intention of the researchers to involve YEAs that, through their personal experience could share their insights on the extent to which students with physical impairment are included in education in their home countries.

Therefore, this thematic paper, consists largely of (1) a record of what different local stakeholders told the authors via surveys and semi-structured interviews, and (2) what the authors believe are reasonable extrapolations from the data. There are no attributions to institutions or to persons in the narrative.

Reflections on all main points of the policy paper will be made through a comparative analysis of the state of play in the six educational systems, without prejudice or overemphasis on a specific system. Where appropriate, European and international comparison data is presented.

Scope and constraints of the study

A mixed methods methodology combined desk research, surveys of students and stakeholders (EaP CSF Working Group 4 members), and semi structured interviews. Interviews were an important component of the research, not least because low survey response numbers were anticipated by both the researchers and the EaP CSF Secretariat. In both surveys all respondents were invited to volunteer for interview. All members of the WG4 were made aware of the surveys and the opportunity to be interviewed. The student survey was distributed through youth and student representation networks. As agreed with the project sponsors the researchers prioritised focus on the student and youth experience of education before and during the Covid-19 crisis. In the face of low survey responses and few volunteers for interview the researchers targeted YEAs for the reasons outlined above. Despite the best efforts of the researchers to reach teachers and lecturers within the timescale of the research this proved impossible. It is worth noting that whilst the YEA interviews expressed frustration with teaching practices this did not manifest as personalised criticism of teachers per se, but rather offered insights on how teachers were undervalued, poorly remunerated and inadequately trained to adapt to the digital environment.

The number of responses to both surveys has been lower than expected. There is learning to be gleaned from this situation as well. Established good practice in survey design and execution indicates that personalised invitations and reminders attract more responses than general distribution through mailing or discussion lists. For this study, the researchers were reliant on third party distribution so did not have control of the messaging accompanying the survey, the timing of circulation or follow-up. Although the commissioning team were supportive of the survey approach, they also acknowledged that surveys did not generally attract good response rates in the EaP countries. We can only speculate about why this is the case, but based on our experience of similar work internationally survey/consultation 'fatigue', scepticism about the outcomes of consultation and wariness about how such data might be used all contribute to disengagement. A longer project timescale would have enabled alternative data collection mechanisms to be deployed, and offered opportunity to widen the field of interview participants.

The timing and timescale of the study was a limiting factor for several reasons. The required timescale for completion of the study included the Christmas festive period, which depending on culture and location could involve extended vacation for potential respondents any time between early December and mid-January. Even without the festive period a comprehensive analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on the six EaP education systems, their contexts and relevant comparators would be challenging to achieve within two months.

Regarding the availability of credible and independent data about the impact of Covid-19, it is relevant to note that at this stage in the pandemic governments' priorities have thus far been focused on monitoring infection, hospitalisation and death rates to safeguard health care and public health considerations; and on considering the economic impact of lockdowns, travel restrictions and unemployment. It is unlikely that any specifically education-focused, independent and credible quantitative data (for example about the absolute numbers of the student and teacher population affected) from within the EaP countries or from international sources will be available until at least 2022. Some provisional data from the World Bank provides some tentative insight about how many pupils/students have been affected by campus closures but, as with any data of this sort, is dependent on the currency and accuracy of information published by the separate countries. While some of this data may be familiar

to readers, the researchers have extrapolated the implications of the data to identify recommendations to support education policy and practice in the EaP countries.

CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

This chapter considers a range of contextual factors relevant to both pre- and post-Covid-19 educational experience and efficacy in the EaP countries, including geo-political and socio-economic factors; employability in a digital economy; status of teaching and teaching capability; conflicts of interest and change agency. It is vital to consider such angles and information, in order to understand the local realities before the pandemic and the challenges on the ground that Covid-19 amplified. In fact, most of the education-related challenges associated with the pandemic (e.g., access to IT equipment and Internet connectivity, digital literacy of pupils, students and teachers) were already endemic to the EaP region before the spread of the pandemic. What the latter mostly did was to shed light on their urgency, an insight that often transpired from the interviews conducted and from the surveys.

Geo-political and economic considerations

Several interviewees referenced the political history of their countries, their lived experience of the economic realities, and made general observations about political scepticism and government capabilities. To explore these themes, we gathered objective data from several international and non-governmental organisations, with a view to comparing and benchmarking EaP realities and data with international comparisons.

It can be assumed that the political geography and reported instability within and adjoining the region impacts on the economic stability, educational priorities and practicalities. For example, several respondents pointed to the fact that the protracted conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with the most recent and grave occurrence in the autumn of 2020, has disrupted civic infrastructure, such as Internet connection. National service for males in Armenia also impacts individual educational choices, well illustrating the interconnectedness of different areas for government policy.

A number of respondents commented on the affordability of the direct and indirect costs of education, which led the research team to first explore relative Gross Domestic Product (GDP) expressed in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) in the region (see Table 1). This indicator was chosen in order to compare the standards of living between countries, while controlling for price level differences between the respective countries.

According to this data, among the six EaP countries, the highest GDP per capita in PPP is in Belarus (19,997.1), whereas the lowest is in Ukraine (13,341.2). Compared to the EU GDP per capita, PPP average, the economic output of the EaP region is about three times lower, pointing to the space for additional economic performance of the local economies and potential for increase in the people's well-being.

Understanding people's incomes is important to see if they are able to pay their bills and are able to make investments in health, education, housing, etc. However, wealth also matters. Because it is accumulated over time and tends to be passed from generation to generation, wealth is spread out much more unequally than income, and this is something that should be kept in mind when thinking of the social and economic inequalities in the EaP region.

Table 1: GDP per capita, PPP (current international $)		
Country	**GDP per capita, PPP (current international $)**	**Year**
Armenia	14,258	2019
Azerbaijan	15,041.3	2019
Belarus	19,997.1	2019
Georgia	15,655.7	2019
Moldova	13,627.0	2019
Ukraine	13,341.2	2019
EU average (for comparative purposes)	46,564.9	2019
Source: The World Bank: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?view=chart		

Education systems can enhance social mobility, yet they can also reproduce and even deepen social divides. Research finds that "on average in most European countries, children from middle-class and wealthy families do better in school, are more likely to go to university and, eventually, earn more as adults. Later on in life, working-age adults with higher levels of education are more likely to benefit from lifelong learning than low-skilled individuals, perpetuating the social divide." (OECD, 2017)

Investing in education and training will contribute not only to individual well-being, but is also a driver for thriving economies. Governments' spending on education in the EaP countries (see Table 2) offers further insights into how education is prioritised and enables comparison with thriving global economies.

With the exception of Moldova and Ukraine, all countries in the EaP region spend under 5% of the GDP on education. Considering the GDP levels in the respective countries and the needs of their education systems, there has been an underfunding of education in the EaP region, especially in Armenia and Azerbaijan, where the government spends less than 3% of the GDP on education.

Table 2: Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP)		
Country	**Government expenditure on education as % of GDP**	**Year**
Armenia	2.7	2017
Azerbaijan	2.5	2018
Belarus	4.8	2017
Georgia	3.5	2018
Moldova	5.4	2018
Ukraine	5.4	2018
EU average (for comparative purposes)	4.7	2017
Source: The World Bank, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS?view=chart		

Employability in a digital economy

During interviews a range of observations emerged concerning the relevance of the available higher education to graduate-entry job opportunities, career development, and capacity to stimulate e-commerce and a digital economy. This theme is tackled through the lenses of Deliverable 18, whose objective is to "strengthen investment in young people's skills, entrepreneurship and employability". This presupposes a system of education that equips graduates with the necessary skills and knowledge to contribute to their local economies, either as entrepreneurs or versatile and well-prepared employees. For this and almost irrespective of the pandemic, much still needs to be done.

For instance, one interviewee describes how education in Ukraine is slow in adapting the curriculum to the societal and labour market realities. There was no evidence emerging from the interviews that available education opportunities implicitly or explicitly offer preparation for the world of work or career advice. A focus on improving data collection in terms of graduate destinations is much needed in the region, in order to measure the impact of the investment in education.

Another interviewee from Armenia stated that for education to contribute to a digital economy, sustained efforts need to go into providing teachers and students with better digital skills and online pedagogies, especially in the context of Covid-19.

Most of those interviewed (students and recent graduates) expressed their dissatisfaction with the poor quality of education in their home countries, coupled with a lack of transparency and academic freedom, especially among some of the state-funded universities. One respondent linked the decreasing quality of higher education in Armenia with the lack of a national policy

to address plagiarism, which has become endemic. There is also a perception that degree content and assessment is "dumbed down" to encourage completion, which in turn risks devaluing the entire higher education system.

Participants cited historic influences which fuelled aspirations towards higher education, which in turn generated high graduate numbers. Without well considered employability and workforce development and labour market strategies the over-qualification challenge continues to be exacerbated. Table 3 presents tertiary enrolments in EAP countries.

Table 3: School enrolment, tertiary (% gross)[1]

Country	**Most recent year**	**% gross**
Armenia	2019	51
Azerbaijan	2019	32
Belarus	2018	87
Georgia	2019	64
Moldova	2019	39
Ukraine	2014	83
European Union (for comparative purposes)	2018	71

Source: The World Bank: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR?locations=EU&view=chart

Looking at over-qualification rates – defined as the percentage of young people with tertiary education occupying a post not traditionally regarded as requiring a tertiary qualification (International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) occupation level 4 to 9), it shows that in the EHEA in 2018, the median over-qualification rate was 23.6%. The countries with the highest over-qualification rates (above 30%) in the EHEA are Armenia (64.3%), Georgia (41%), Ukraine (34.3%) and Belarus (32.4%) (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020, p.115).

While the value of diplomas also depends on the existing demand of the market and the overall macro-economic outlook of the respective country, a reason for these high over-qualification rates in the EaP region might also be the low quality of the higher education experience. Moreover, this mismatch between graduates' academic backgrounds and their actual jobs, might also be due to the negative reputation of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in the EaP region. One interviewee from Ukraine said that in her country, VET is not at all well regarded, and the name of VET was even changed in order to escape its bad reputation. These

[1] Gross enrolment ratio for tertiary school is calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in tertiary education regardless of age by the population of the age group which officially corresponds to tertiary education, and multiplying by 100.

perceptions coupled with the economic outlook of the countries can explain this vertical mismatch between graduates' academic qualifications and their jobs.

Graduate preparedness for a digital economy also emerged as a theme within the research. A number of factors contribute to this, including national infrastructure, the low prevalence of e-commerce in the region, especially in rural areas, and low digital literacy amongst parents and teachers, which in turn inhibit digital entrepreneurship and digital skills acquisition amongst students.

Status of teaching and teaching capability

All interview participants reported a range of issues relating to the status and capabilities of teachers and lecturers in their countries, including among other things, high staff turnover, inadequate teacher training for modern education, an aging teacher population exhibiting outmoded attitudes and skills, and appointment through nepotism rather than capability.

Interview data indicated that the level of remuneration for teachers was considered insufficient to promote education as a career of choice for the most able graduates, and that there was little encouragement or appetite to engage in teacher training, i.e., continuing professional development (CPD) to maintain the currency and relevance of teaching practice.

The challenge of professional currency and CPD is not exclusive to EaP countries. The EU-funded EFFECT project (European University Association, 2019) researched several aspects of higher education teacher training, reward and recognition between 2015 and 2019, made a number of recommendations widely applicable across the EHEA, and developed an archive of resources that could be usefully adapted and deployed in the EaP region. Ten Principles for Enhancing Learning and Teaching (EFFECT, 2018) provide a useful template for stimulating policy debate; insights about the effectiveness of teaching prizes in raising the status and profile of excellent teaching; and resources to assist in overcoming unconscious bias and promoting positive attitudes to supporting a diverse student community all align well with themes emerging from this study into the impact of Covid-19 on access to education in the EaP region.

Conflicts of interest and change agency

A dominant theme emerging from the interviews related to perceptions of widespread and systemic 'corruption' across all sectors and at all levels of the education system. The examples offered covered a range of practices which might be alternatively called conflicts of interest, nepotism or cronyism.

Of particular concern was the suggestion that teachers and lecturers routinely strategically under-taught their students in class to create a market for their own out-of-hours private tuition business – for example a student paying for additional tuition might be awarded additional marks regardless of their performance in assessment, which as well as undermining the validity of the assessment also provided 'evidence' to other students that the additional tuition improved results. Although dissatisfied with this kind of practice interviewees acknowledged that inadequate remuneration for teaching encouraged teachers to generate additional income to meet basic living costs, and that poor regulation and quality control over curricula and assessment did little to identify or prevent pockets of 'corrupt' practice. It is foreseeable that Covid-19 will lead to the further spread of private tutoring, especially considering the perceived shortcomings of online education during the first months of the

pandemic, with many parents and teachers alike talking about several missed months of educational progress. Meantime, in Moldova, as of December 2020, the government allocated 105 million MLD for paying teachers for their additional activity during the pandemic.

The researchers also heard accounts of nepotistic and reciprocal appointments to academic and senior policy positions from within a small and self-sustaining 'in' group. Such practice was largely attributed to opaque and unregulated mechanisms for appointment which perpetuated the culture of reciprocity. These practices are in stark contrast to standard practice in comparator systems where teaching, research, leadership and policy positions are subject to appointment against objective and transparent criteria, reviewed by an appointment panel and ratified by a representative body, often including peer and student representatives. Many education systems and institutions across the EHEA and globally have leadership development programmes to ensure senior post-holders have been well prepared for the practical, ethical and technical demands of leadership and understand how to incorporate 'student-centeredness' into their practices. As mentioned above, the Ten Principles for enhancing Teaching and Learning provide a useful template for discussions of practice and policy. Such leadership development and modernisation of education systems would have built resilience to support rapid adaptation during Covid-19.

The wide-spread perception of 'corruption' from classroom to government fundamentally undermines faith in the quality, validity and value of the educational opportunities available in the EaP countries. This is of particular concern during the pandemic when compliance with virus containment strategies and belief in the efficacy of policy directives on all aspects of society, including education, rely on public confidence in the state apparatus. The researchers' view is that such low confidence in government, policy and educational practice will over time contribute to a significant 'brain drain', leading the most able students and graduates to seek what might be seen as more credible opportunities elsewhere. That said, interviewees also spoke of 'going away to come back' so they could make a difference to the future of their countries. This commitment to change is encouraging and indicates the importance of empowering and investing in change agents in the region, particularly in order to affect beliefs and attitudes. Change agents can be both individuals (such as the Young European Ambassadors) but also institutional (schools and higher education institutions). Their empowerment should continue, especially through EU-funded peer learning and capacity building initiatives, such as via the Erasmus+ programme).

COVID-19

All of these contextual considerations sit alongside the raw facts of Coronavirus rates of infection in the EaP countries (see Table 4).

It was sobering to hear from one interviewee that Covid-19 had not been their greatest challenge during 2020, but rather that the Nagorno-Karabakh war (27 September-10 November 2020) had resulted in huge loss of life and disrupted infrastructure. On 3rd December 2020, Reuters reported 2317 Armenian and 2783 Azerbaijani casualties in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Funded by
the European Union

Table 4: Overview of Covid-19 cases in the EaP countries

Country	Total cases	Total deaths	Total recovered	Active cases	Critical cases	Cases/ 1M pop	Deaths/ 1M pop	Total tests	Tests/ 1M pop	Population
Armenia	166,901	3,071	157,314	6,516		56,263	1,035	646,563	217,957	2,966,467
Azerbaijan	230,066	3,126	222,960	3,980		22,573	307	2,401,720	235,644	10,192,145
Belarus	246,570	1,708	233,499	11,363		26,099	181	4,453,387	471,382	9,447,512
Georgia	257,632	3,159	248,537	5,936		64,655	793	2,197,437	551,468	3,984,701
Moldova	158,860	3,424	149,026	6,410	199	39,434	850	623,462	154,763	4,028,493
Ukraine	1,216,278	22,628	1,014,658	178,992	177	27,909	519	6,184,320	141,907	43,580,177
UK #	3,772,813	104,371	1,673,936	1,994,506	3,918	55,407	1,533	71,677,362	1,052,637	68,093,162
France ##	3,153,487	75,620	223,174	2,854,693	3,130	48,250	1,157	43,339,479	663,113	65,357,560
World	102,752,041	2,218,914	74,470,585	26,062,542	109,061	13,182	284.7			

Source: https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/ (accessed 30/01/2021)
The website provides live data updated daily and includes hot links to each country's own data source
#Highest rate in Europe, provided for comparison
##Highest rate in the EU, provided for comparison

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON ACCESS TO EDUCATION

School closures and the emergency transition to distance learning

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide, with most governments deciding to temporarily close all educational institutions to contain the virus. This has been also the case in the EaP region, where with the exception of Belarus, all countries suspended the educational provision in March 2020 under the terms of the state of emergency (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2021). This, in turn has necessitated an emergency transition to distance learning.

It is important to differentiate between 'distance', 'online' and 'blended' learning, and to address the significance of these terms in their emergency and substantive modes.

Distance education has long been a vehicle for offering educational opportunities to communities with limited access to mainstream, face-to-face education. Historically, correspondence courses provided self-improvement and professional qualifications through print media; Australia's School of the Air used HF radio to provide peer and teacher support to school-age pupils who might live 300 km from the nearest school; and the Open University in the UK was established in the 1960s as a vehicle for social mobility in the 'technological age'. As technology has evolved online learning has become the dominant vehicle for the delivery of distance learning but has also been used to augment campus learning by providing opportunities for students to revisit topics, undertake interactive tasks to cement their learning, and to access their learning at times and from locations that suit their lives and responsibilities. From this has evolved the concept of blended learning which actively and proactively combines elements of campus-based, distance and online pedagogies to offer flexible learning to youth and life-long learners. In all these examples the learning processes and resources have been proactively designed to meet various social, economic and self-actualisation motives of learners and policy-makers.

In contrast, **the Covid-19 crisis has required the emergency transition from face-to-face education** without time to redesign materials or activities for distance or online presentation. This presents a number of challenges:

- Many education systems across the world, including in the EaP region have been investing in digital learning platforms and infrastructure for many years and so assumptions have been made that 'online learning' is the obvious solution to the current campus closures. In most education systems, however, the development of digital pedagogy skills has lagged behind the potential offered by the digital tools available, so that sophisticated learning platforms are often reduced to repositories of static materials, rather than being fully utilised as interactive learning environments.
- In an era of mass online citizen-created content the lack of digital literacy skills by youth, their parents and even their teachers creates opportunity for 'fake news' and conspiracy to replace carefully curated, intellectually credible learning resources and activities.
- Even in advanced economies there exist communities educationally and socially disadvantaged by limited, unreliable and unaffordable access to broadband connectivity and ICT equipment. Interviewees contributing to this project reported that although all students and pupils encountered obstacles in navigating their educational experience

during Covid-19, those students already at risk before the pandemic (e.g., students from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds, students with caring responsibilities, etc.) were even further impacted. Moreover, new categories of learners became at risk, such as transitioning students (from secondary to tertiary education), international students, or those facing unexpected financial pressures due to job loss triggered by Covid-19.

- From comments related to the digital skills and confidence of teachers it is reasonable to extrapolate that even teachers with adequate ICT and connectivity to meet their pre-Covid-19 needs will have been additionally challenged during the pandemic by the availability of equipment and limited by both infrastructure and underinvestment in modernising their digital pedagogy skills.
- While online learning is meant to be a long-term solution, emergency distance education is activated in response to a crisis, it is intended to be temporary and so may lack resources, a strategy or contingency planning.

Covid-19 has therefore led to a **roll-out of emergency distance education via digital tools, rather than carefully designed online or blended learning.** The shift to distance/online has presented major challenges for students, teachers, parents, school and university leaders, as well as for national educational policymakers, young people and non-governmental organisations active in the field of non-formal education. Rather than being the great equaliser, as sometimes presented by the media, reliance on online tools during this pandemic has further magnified existing inequalities in access and participation in education.

With all educational institutions shut down as of March 2020 in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, enrolment data from the World Bank provides some tentative insight about how many pupils/students have been affected by campus closures in the EaP region, but as with any data of this sort is dependent on the currency and accuracy of information published by the separate countries (see Table 5).

In the short term, the quality of distance education has varied a lot, depending on **the infrastructure available, the capacities of teaching staff to adapt their methods to online teaching and the field of study**. These variables are not necessarily specific to the EaP region, being highlighted also in the study conducted by the International Association of Universities (Giorgio Marinoni, Hilligje van't Land, Trine Jensen, 2020).

Table 5: Enrolment data in the EaP region

Country	Total enrolment	Pre-Primary	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Armenia	540.503	49.214	153.415	234.983	102.891
Azerbaijan	1.983.999	203.011	635.153	945.226	200.609
Belarus	1.815.809	349.373	427.752	649.357	389.327
Georgia	815.661	78.642	305.368	280.425	151.226
Moldova	586.158	132.459	140.141	226.281	87.277
Ukraine	6.785.004	1.116.970	1.676.550	2.376.848	1.614.636

Source: https://www.worldbank.org/en/data/interactive/2020/03/24/world-bank-education-and-covid-19 (accessed 03/02/2021)
All enrolment data is from 2018.

According to recent research (Murshudova et al. 2021) conducted in Azerbaijan on a sample of over 1200 higher education students, 76% of respondents said that they were new to online learning, whereas only about a quarter (24%) had already followed online classes prior to the pandemic. The majority of those students being exposed to online learning for the first time, said that they would still prefer the traditional, face-to-face form of teaching, mainly because of technical difficulties encountered with online learning (89.6%) and unprepared instructors (75%). However, the large majority of respondents with prior online experience expressed their desire to continue studying online after the end of the pandemic.

Infrastructure, funding and costs

For the purposes of this analysis, we have defined 'infrastructure' as the technical routes and tools through which students can potentially access online services; 'funding' as relating to the sources of investment in technical and educational infrastructure (for example by government, NGOs, business, etc); and 'costs' as the fees, charges and expenses associated with educational participation incurred by students and their families.

The number of individuals using the Internet in the EaP region, as a percentage of the total population, differs quite a lot from country to country (see Table 6). According to the World Bank data, in Belarus, 83% of the population has access to the Internet. At the opposite end there is Ukraine, where, while broadband appears to be fast and cheap, take-up is still relatively low – only around half the population has Internet access.

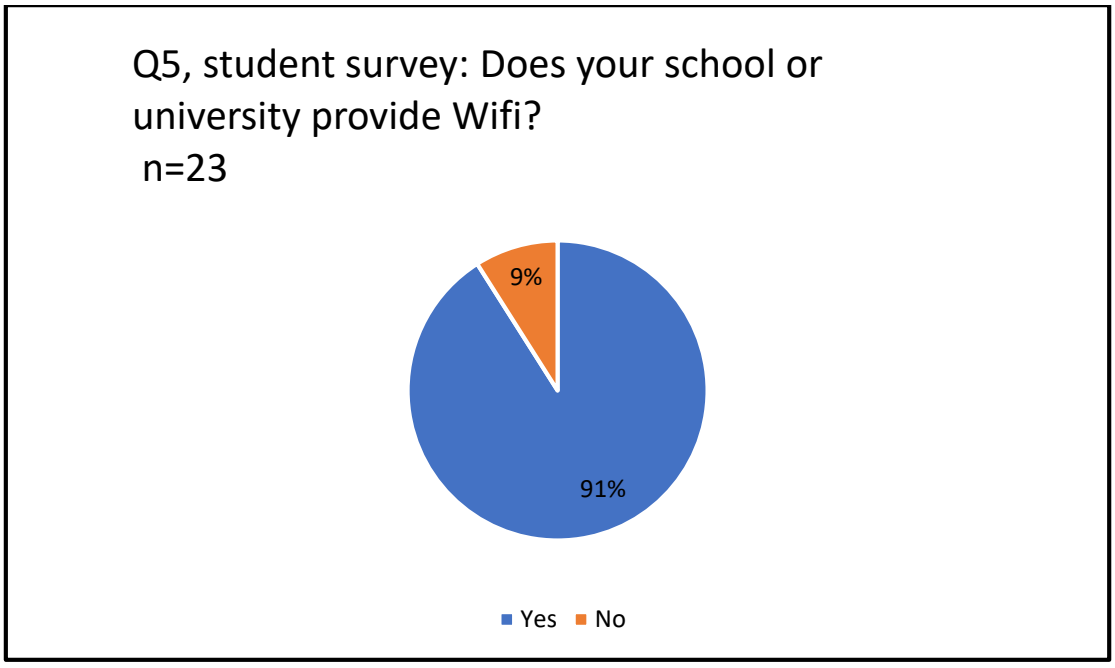
Table 6: Individuals using the Internet (% of population)

Country	**Most recent year**	**% of population**
Armenia	2019	65%
Azerbaijan	2019	80%
Belarus	2019	83%
Georgia	2019	69%
Moldova	2019	76%
Ukraine	2019	59%
European Union (for comparative purposes)	2018	82%

Source: The World Bank: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS

Survey and interview respondents cited a range of challenges with access to reliable internet/Wi-Fi and personal computing and communication technology. The rapid transition to emergency distance education has placed an additional burden on students and their families with some reporting a stark choice between paying for food and paying for the Internet. Despite 91% of students reporting that their schools or universities provided Wi-Fi (Graph 1), it was also reported that in some places where universities do maintain reliable Wi-Fi connectivity students are not allowed access, this being instead reserved for staff of the institutions solely. A respondent to the student survey also wrote that "the Wi-Fi is great overall, but in dorm rooms it is inconsistent in terms of speed and connection".

Graph 1:



Accounts suggested that many students are relying on mobile data contracts which are rather expensive. According to an interviewee, in Azerbaijan, for instance, a good internet connection costs about 20 AZ manat monthly, in addition to the 100 AZ manat charged for the Internet router. To avoid at least the cost of the router, students mainly use mobile Internet packages, on average costing 20 AZ manat per month. However, due to the switch to online learning, students had to upgrade their mobile Internet subscriptions more often, and so their spending increased.

The researchers sought independent data to contextualise the experiences reported through surveys and interviews. Data relating to the average cost of broadband in EaP countries is presented below (see Table 7). We have added additional information to illustrate relative affordability and to provide European and international comparisons.

Table 7: Average cost of broadband in the EaP countries

Country	Average cost of broadband per month in USD (x)	Average cost of broadband per month in local currency (y)	Purchasing Power Parity (y/x)	Average cost of broadband as a % of GDP per capita, PPP
Armenia	$14.58	7,000 AMD	480.11	3%
Azerbaijan	$16.76	28.50 AZN	1.7	0.01%
Belarus	$10.11	21.50 BYR	2.13	0.01%
Georgia	$12.20	40 GEL	3.28	0.02%
Moldova	$9.95	172.75 MDL	17.36	0.13%
Ukraine	$6.41	180 UAH	28.08	0.21%
United Kingdom (for comparative purposes)	$34.78	26 GBP	0.75	0.0015%
China (for comparative purposes)	$12.26	80 CNY	6.53	0.04%
Source : https://www.cable.co.uk/broadband/pricing/worldwide-comparison/				

Based on absolute numbers, the EaP countries are among the cheapest in the world for broadband, according to research by Cable.co.uk. Ukraine is the cheapest country in the EaP with an average package price of $6.41 per month, followed in 8th place overall by Moldova ($9.95), with Belarus in the 9th place ($10.11), Georgia in the 15th ($12.20), Armenia in the 21st ($14.58) and Azerbaijan in the 26th ($16.76). Based on Table 7 above, in terms of affordability of broadband (indicated by average cost of broadband as a percentage of GDP per capita PPP), the only outlier is Armenia, where the average cost of broadband as a percentage of GDP per capita expressed in Purchasing Power Parity is 3%.

According to one of the stakeholders that filled out the institutional survey, more than 20% of students that they work with have device availability or connectivity issues, despite the low prices for Internet connectivity. The National Youth Council of Moldova conducted a study according to which between June-September 2020, 11% of the students (aged 6-19) were not able to participate in online education, either due to a lack of Internet connection (27%) or due

to a lack of ICT equipment (73%) (Platforma Nationala a Forumului Societatii Civile din Parteneriatul Estic, 2020).

The transition to emergency distance teaching found many educational establishments unprepared. Although the EaP countries are among the cheapest in the world for broadband and benefit from a good Internet penetration, many schools and universities still did not have a technical infrastructure in place for distance learning, while some teachers and students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds lacked laptops for sole use or a quiet space to study. In one case the research team heard of computer programming being taught by pen and paper because of insufficient computers at the respective higher education institution.

Especially at the level of primary and secondary education, as teachers, parents and pupils were not familiar with online learning environments nor with online teaching methods, the period from March-May 2020 was mostly lost, according to several interviewees. In the absence of a specialist online learning and teaching platform, most of the teaching took place via WhatsApp and Facebook.

In the EaP countries, as everywhere around the world, Covid-19 threatens to widen the education gap and exacerbate existing inequalities. Rural versus urban realities can weigh heavily, given that especially those living in rural areas are hit by limited Internet and cell phone service, in some cases erratic electricity supply and sparse school provision. Household incomes, even before the pandemic impacted school attendance, with rural areas witnessing some of the lowest participation and completion rates, compared to capital cities (UNICEF, 2020). In a context in which the pandemic led to many job losses, paying for Internet coverage suddenly became even harder for low-income families. In addition, electricity bills went up, with several family members working and studying from home. According to a respondent, “some of the students are not turning on their cameras during online activities, feeling that their living conditions are not adequate for display”.

To address the technological shortcomings, governments in the EaP countries launched several measures. In Azerbaijan, the government signed an agreement with Microsoft to develop an integrated online platform within Microsoft Teams. This platform has operated since September 2020, and in addition to being used for teaching online courses, it also hosts online teach the teachers events, for instance on upgrading teachers’ digital skills and online pedagogies. In Georgia, the government together with the UNDP launched a TV programme for delivering lessons, although this broadcast model is difficult to evaluate for participation or learning efficacy (i.e., how many pupils have been following the lessons, if the content has been understood, etc.). In Moldova, the government approved additional 20 million MDL for buying computers to equip schools, although it is unclear what reach this represents in terms of improved student access. As the UK experience illustrates the political commitment of funds does not always equate to timely or adequate provision of equipment.

Internet and mobile phone providers also stepped in to facilitate the access to online learning. In Armenia, several Internet providers offered special packages for students, for instance by making access to online platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams free of charge.

Civil society organisations and international donors complemented or, at times even substituted governmental mitigation measures, for example by distributing IT equipment

(phones and computers) to those student groups at risk, such as internally displaced people, or those living in remote areas. Several interviewees deplored the fact that this task [of distributing IT equipment to those in need] was left to NGOs, rather than being taken up by the governmental authorities. In Moldova, for instance, in addition to the 20 million MDL allocated by the government, NGOs such as the Soros Foundation Moldova, Children's Foundation "Pestalozzi" from Switzerland and the Global Partnership for Education via UNICEF contributed with provision of computers for children, students and teachers.

Digital skills and online pedagogies

In addition to the challenge of access to IT equipment and Internet connection, the transition to emergency remote teaching also offered a sobering reality to both teachers and students that online teaching requires a different pedagogy than the face-to-face norms. Interviewees unanimously agreed that the transition to distance teaching has been a major challenge for the teaching staff in the EaP countries. This was largely attributed to an aging teacher population who years have not been exposed to or did not embrace innovative teaching techniques. Teaching online, in most cases, has been conducted without any interactive methods, in an attempt to imitate what would have been the face-to-face way of proceeding, yet using distance mode. This is confirmed by the responses received to the student survey, where only 30% of the respondent (i.e., 6) said that their school or university offers interactive tools for learning (such as voting/commenting applications like Poll everywhere, Mentimeter, etc.). Interviewees reported that their teachers did not have adequate digital skills to support the move to online learning, nor to equip students to adapt to new modes of learning.

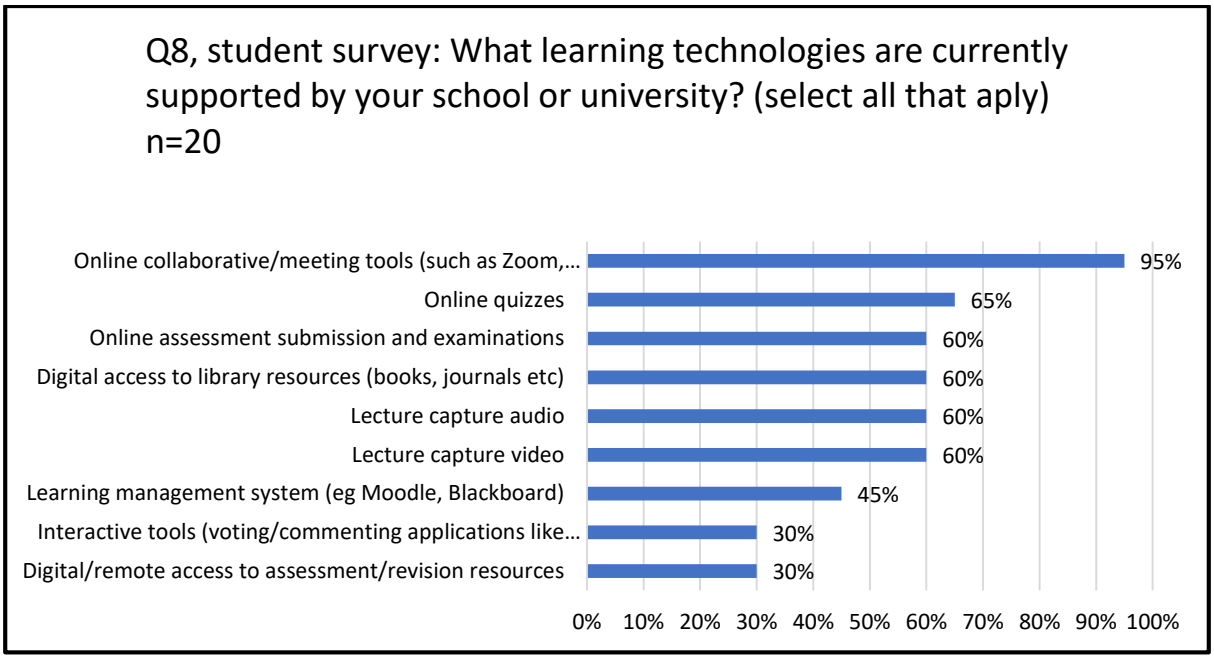
The rapid transition to distance teaching meant that there was no time to adapt the curriculum to online delivery. Given that education in the EaP countries is rather centralised and that the school curricula need to be approved by the relevant national authorities, this meant that teachers had to continue fulfilling all the initially foreseen learning outcomes (set before the outbreak of the pandemic). According to a recent study conducted in Moldova (Banari and Beldiga, 2021), teachers confirmed to have encountered difficulties with online teaching in accordance with the requirements of the school curriculum, designed for face-to-face teaching and left unadapted for online delivery. Teachers expressed their disappointment that the national authorities left in their care both the organisation of remediation classes and the adaption of curriculum to online delivery, especially in a context where new state requirements for student assessment and reporting involved a significant amount of unpaid work.

At times, online lessons were used by the teacher only to share a PowerPoint presentation, without any subsequent discussions. While online pedagogies for teaching are lacking overall, the problem of pedagogical staff development (teacher training) at all levels of education seems to be an endemic one even before the outbreak of Covid-19. This is partly because teacher training is not financially incentivised in the EaP region and that, as in the case of Ukraine, is being offered through the National Institutes for Teachers, archaic structures that do not necessarily embrace innovative teaching methods. Although methodologies may exist on paper, their implementation will not be successful without teachers adapting their practice and changing their attitudes. As one interviewee from Ukraine pointed out, it will not help that the book is gender balanced if the teacher does not convey this through his/her attitude and through his/her teaching.

Even where adequate pedagogies for online teaching were used, the field of study has played a major role on the impact of Covid-19 on participation to quality education. Subjects that require practical and lab work, such as medicine, veterinary studies, but also for creative areas such as music were particularly impacted by the pandemic.

At the institutional level, mitigation measures, although disparate, have also been set in place. In terms of learning technologies currently supported by schools and universities, 95% (i.e., 19) of the respondents to the student survey said that their institution offers online collaborative tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams (see Graph 2).

Graph 2:



However, the majority of respondents to the student survey confirmed that they did not receive any training to help them use the learning technologies made available by their universities/schools.

In addition to digitalising the learning process, some universities in the region came up with additional mitigation measures. For instance, according to one Armenian respondent, her university provided Covid-19 scholarships for students in need, while also setting in place a loan scheme for laptops to students that needed one. The university also made it possible for those students without proper Internet or IT equipment at home to sit for exams on the premises of the university. However, given the lack of data, it cannot be inferred how many universities adopted such measures for their student population.

Non-formal education

Non-formal education activities have also been heavily impacted by Covid-19. 81% (i.e., 13) of the respondents to the survey for stakeholders represented NGOs, with half of them being youth representatives and youth workers. Almost three quarters said that they are concerned about the financial survival of their organisation due to Covid-19, especially since none said

that so far, their home governments supported their organisations with the disruption caused by the pandemic. For most of the respondents, Covid-19 negatively impacted their community engagement (e.g., work with youth and disadvantaged groups). Activities had to be moved online, with one NGO representative mentioning that his/her organisation offered skills training for online activities, while another identified online activities around awareness raising among youth to self-isolate amid ignorance about Covid-19 by the Belarusian government.

Some of the interviewees emphasised that non-formal education in the EaP countries did not benefit much from governmental support before the outbreak of Covid-19 and that the pandemic only worsened the situation. For instance, in Armenia there has been no law on volunteering, nor a national youth strategy, while in Belarus there has been a systematic problem with the transfer of non-education methodologies to Belarussian youth trainers – for instance, in terms of human rights education, environmental education, media literacy, etc. Among the causes are the lack of funding for translation materials, but also the lack of structural capacities to cater for translations.

Equity of access and lifelong learning

As discussed above, there are relatively high education participation rates across the EaP region, and we heard generally positive accounts of encouragement by family for young people to progress to higher education. The researchers also heard accounts of particular barriers for students from remote and rural areas where primary and secondary education were negatively impacted by transport, fragile electricity supply, and sparsity of schools necessitating pupils to walk considerable distances to attend. Furthermore, the logistical challenges posed by fragile infrastructure in rural areas have also inhibited COVID-19-related initiatives to move to online learning.

Particular challenges emerged for students from disadvantaged groups. Definitions of disadvantage vary from country to country, as illustrated in Annex 3. Physical disability is the category of disadvantage most widely recognised. According to official data, in Armenia there are 8623 children with disabilities aged between 0–18-year-old; 38% of them live in vulnerable families receiving the Poverty Family Benefits; only 190 students with disabilities are enrolled in VET education and there are only 43 students with disabilities in Armenian universities (EASPD, 2020, p. 29). In Moldova, according to the same study, the number of children with disabilities was 10,635 in 2018, with 62% of them living in a rural area. In Belarus, as of 2010, there were an estimated 25,867 children with registered disabilities, whereas in Ukraine as of 2002, 153,000 children under 16 were officially registered with a disability, a high proportion of them living in residential institutions, where their rights are often ignored or violated (HealthProm, 2017).

The number of people with disabilities might be higher than is being reported, considering the fact that this category includes only persons who were granted a disability status, this being often the case for persons with medium and severe impairments. Because of a rather restrictive interpretation of disability, the persons with light and moderate forms of disability very often are not necessarily considered as disabled (in the formal, legal acceptance of the term). Therefore, they are not granted a disability status, not registered and not included in the official statistics. It is therefore not only impossible to determine the exact number of pupils

and children with disability, but invariably also of those witnessing disadvantage, in the broader interpretation of the term.

While more official data collection is needed, it can be safely inferred that many pupils and students experience simultaneous types of disadvantage, for instance having a disability and living in a rural area. For instance, the Belarusian Children's Hospice reports that families of children with disabilities are often unaware of their legal rights and entitlements, such as benefits, housing and free medication. This is particularly pronounced for families who live in rural areas. (HealthProm, 2017).

Interviewees reported inadequate physical adaptation to buildings, for example positioning of ramps and lack of wheelchair accessible bathrooms. Furthermore, even in specialist schools pupils were taught by non-specialist teachers, for example deaf students by teachers without sign language, while experiencing high levels of staff turnover. 30% of the interview participants had direct personal experience of these issues and of how their transition to higher education had been affected. Particular barriers rose from engrained cultural attitudes to differently able students which inhibited engagement with lecturers, whilst the lack of a specialist dedicated support service (for example, able to provide Braille or endorse and standardise adjustments to examination timing or alternative assessment formats) limited educational engagement.

For students with disabilities, Covid-19 impacted their access to education even further. According to one respondent with visual impairment from Georgia, there has been no system in place to teach blind students how to use technology, hence their participation in formal education has been severely impacted, especially since the full transition to online learning. Moreover, disability support assistants to accompany participation in online activities have been lacking at all levels of education.

> *Student testimonial: for a person with disabilities, it is already hard to fight stereotypes when entering on site higher education; but it is even harder to break stereotypes in an online environment; when going back to the campus, students with disabilities that started their schooling online, will have to start it all over again in terms of meeting their teachers, colleagues, introducing themselves and breaking the stereotypes.*

While people with disabilities, including children remain highly marginalised in the EaP countries due to social stigma, the pandemic worsened the situation and that of their families in terms of access to public infrastructure and services. Despite the plethora of access-related legislation presented in Annex 3, it is clear from the testimonies collected for this study that there remain shortcomings in the enactment of legislation and in the cultural attitudes prevalent towards disability.

As of 2020, lifelong learning remains a priority for action on Deliverable 18, especially given the particularly low lifelong learning participation rates in the EaP region (see Table 8). This could be attributed to the relatively high participation directly from school but also indicates limited opportunities for retraining, mid-career upskilling or skills development for emerging industries, especially digital business.

Table 8: Percentage of students enrolled in tertiary education, 30 or more years old, in 2017	
Moldova	9.3%
Ukraine	6.5%
Georgia	3.7%
Azerbaijan	1.6%
EHEA median in 2017	17.3%
Source : Bologna Implementation Report 2020, p. 108	

The lowest percentages of mature students in the EHEA are in Georgia and Azerbaijan (at the opposite end is Iceland with 35% and Finland with 33% of mature students enrolled in tertiary education).

Limited opportunities for lifelong learning in the EaP region, including mid-career upskilling and practice modernisation, have undoubtedly contributed to the challenges faced during the Covid-19 crisis by teachers and parents assisting young people with the switch to online/distance learning. Testimony from the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) also identified the importance of online, flexible and/or distance learning provision for workforce development in professional shortage areas like teaching, nursing, IT – shortages which have become critical during the pandemic.

LONG-TERM IMPACTS OF COVID-19

As shown earlier, it became evident that Covid-19 precluded access to education in the short-term. The degree of impact depends on three main dimensions as explained above, namely: access to infrastructure, capacities of teaching staff to adapt their methods to online teaching and the field of study.

Based on the currently available information and trends, several likely long-term effects of Covid-19 on education in the EaP region can be expected. Just like in 2020, it is safe to assume that many students will continue to have an incomplete learning experience in 2021, either for lack of technology, access to broadband or inadequate pedagogies for online learning and teaching. As the World Education Blog of UNESCO states, “we are no longer in an emergency but in a protracted crisis that is increasingly devastating – not only educationally, but socially, economically and mentally.” (Stefania Giannini, 2021).

The worrying effects of the pandemic on the learning experience can already be sensed, by learners, teachers and parents alike. In Moldova for instance, according to a very recent study (Banari and Beldiga, 2021), 89% of the teachers surveyed said that they noticed a decrease of student performance during the pandemic; moreover, half of the parents of the students surveyed in the study confirmed that since the beginning of the Covid-19, their children

complain more often of not understanding the learning materials, and that their children's results got worse.

With diminished learning and likely increased student failure, Salmi contests that "what is certain is that students graduating this year are facing difficult prospects in the medium and long terms. Many will have trouble finding jobs, and those who do will likely have starting salaries far below those earned by graduates of previous years. In developing countries, where unemployment was already chronically high because the economy cannot absorb the growing number of university graduates, the situation will only worsen." (Jamil Salmi, 2020, p.7) Graduate employability is particularly relevant for the EaP countries, considering their high over-qualification rates presented earlier in the study. Covid-19 will likely exacerbate the vertical mismatch between graduates' academic qualifications and their jobs, in a macroeconomic context where also the aggregate demand will most likely be affected by the pandemic. The economic recession is very likely to increase the rate of unemployment, especially among young graduates.

In countries where public spending for higher education is low (i.e., under 0.5% of the GDP), as is the case in several of the EaP countries, unless the government provides a recovery package, closures and restructuring (such as mergers) are expected. Moreover, without an educational recovery package, those students hit most by the pandemic might not be able to return to school, leading to an increase in the drop-out rates.

The connection between the economy and education cannot be over-stated. Economic renewal and regeneration in the era of e-commerce and digital business can only be founded on the skills of a digitally literate, entrepreneurial graduate workforce. Failure to invest in employability and digital skills, and the pedagogical skills to support such learning within the mainstream education framework will perpetuate a downward economic spiral which will, in turn preserve an out-moded and inequitable education system. Such a path would reduce resilience and leave EaP countries increasingly vulnerable to the consequences of the next pandemic, war, or natural disaster.

Opportunities

As with any other crisis, Covid-19 has forced innovation and questioning of established practices and approaches. This is even more the case in education, which prepares not only the graduates of tomorrow, but also the citizens of the future.

Although the shift to emergency distance education has been abrupt and challenging, it is also an opportunity for more strategically reconsidering online education, which in the EaP region, according to the interviewees, has been historically devalued, with fully online programmes not being accredited. The pandemic made some of the governments in the EaP countries rethink their approach towards online education. For instance, in June 2020 the Ukrainian Ministry of Education permitted accreditation of higher education programmes based on distance learning. This flexibility in accreditation, and more generally in quality assurance has been also noticed around the world: "one positive outcome of the Covid-19 crisis has been a more favourable view of online education, which in many countries had been considered as a second-rate kind of education, often subject to substantial constraints and strict regulations." (Jamil, Salmi, 2020, p. 8)

Based on experience with The Open Universities in the UK and in other European countries, online education could lead to the introduction of flexible learning pathways, which for the moment are rare in the EaP region. Invariably, such flexibility in the education offer will also increase access to lifelong learning opportunities.

The pandemic has shed even more light on the challenges and obstacles faced by learners from disadvantaged groups seeking access to education, especially in times of crisis. Beyond the immediate risk mitigation strategies, Covid-19 could be used by the local governments as an opportunity to advance a social inclusion agenda for those with fewer opportunities. As the past months have proven, the systematic collection of data by governmental agencies should be the first step, in order to accurately identify those affected by disadvantage.

Another opportunity that Covid-19 has brought about is a reconsideration of the role played by teacher training (continuing professional development) in advancing a reformed and innovative curriculum. Recognition of the need to build individual and organisational capacity with regard to digital skills and modern pedagogies would have certainly taken longer without the momentum created by the pandemic.

Covid-19 has also reiterated the value of peer learning in addressing common challenges. Collaboration in terms of public-private partnerships, the involvement of civil society and external donors, as has been the case in the EaP region, helped to mitigate the short-term effects of the crisis, and promoted more systematic cooperation between these various stakeholders to respond to the longer-term challenges triggered by this pandemic.

The current crisis has highlighted the need for strategic approaches to capacity building focused on digitalisation, enhancement of teaching competences in online environments, inclusion and equity in online learning and teaching, student assessment and curriculum design.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers have identified four headline conclusions:

- Pre-Covid-19 underfunding of educational and technological infrastructure, combined with under-investment in teacher development and skills modernisation (especially for digital literacy and employability) has severely inhibited the region's capacity to sustain an effective educational experience for school pupils and university students during the Covid-19 pandemic. Such underinvestment also inhibits countries' resilience to crisis and disaster;
- The Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated the disadvantage experienced by pupils/students already affected by socio-economic, geo-political and diversity marginalisation;
- The Covid-19 pandemic has presented opportunities for innovation and an acceleration of digitisation in education and the economy. In particular, opportunities arise to overcome historical scepticism towards online, distance or 'open' learning. Across Europe and beyond, developing more flexible learning pathways has been proven to improve equitable access to higher and life-long learning for underrepresented groups, and to facilitate modernising the workforce through improved access to continuing professional development;
- Education is the basis for a strong, entrepreneurial, globally competitive economy. There is a circular interdependence between education and the economy such that stagnation in

one leads to stagnation in the other; Strengthening investment in young people's skills and delivering quality education need to be further reinforced in the EaP countries for a sustainable post-pandemic recovery.

Higher education plays a vital role in the post pandemic recovery. By developing the skills of the future workforce and driving research and innovation, the quality and relevance of higher education will inevitably shape the socio-economic future of any country. With adequate measures and sufficient funding, higher education can be a key enabler of the recovery.

Although the precise extent of the economic and financial impact of Covid-19 on the EaP economies remains to be seen, it will, undoubtedly be substantial. Some of the evidence suggests that the recovery will lead to further inequalities, where the rich emerge even wealthier, and the marginalised even more marginalised. Among other things, the role of education is to prevent such trends, but this can happen only if a variety of actors, from national governments, to schools, universities, civil society organisations and the international donor community take concrete steps.

Recommendations

Specific recommendations flow from our analysis, in particular relating to funding and investment; professionalisation and modernisation of the teaching/lecturing profession; and national, regional and European collaboration and partnership. To sustain and enhance the educational opportunities of EaP youth during and beyond the Covid-19 crisis strategists, policy-makers, front-line educators, students, civil society NGOs, the EU and employers all have a part to play. Our recommendations are directed at these stakeholders. There was considerable convergence in the issues and recommendations made by our interviewees so al recommendations apply to all EaP countries unless otherwise indicated.

Recommendations for the European Union

- EU funding has played a crucial role in contributing to the development of education in the EaP region. Given the effects of the pandemic on education, the EU should **fund capacity building initiatives** for schools and higher education institutions, such as the set-up of student support services or learning and teaching centres.
- To complement national funding, the EU should **invest in technical equipment** (such as laptops and tablets) for pupils and students at-risk.
- EU funding should also be allocated to **peer learning and knowledge transfer among teachers**, especially on topics such as **digital training** and **online pedagogies**. All interviewees emphasised the importance and success of the **eTwinning Plus** project, which should be continued as it allowed for exchange of experience and expertise between schools from the EaP region and their EU counterparts.
- **The Erasmus+ programme** greatly helped the education systems of the EaP countries, via student mobility, youth exchanges and capacity building initiatives. Especially in the context of post pandemic recovery, it is important that more and diverse beneficiaries will get to participate in the programme, such as schools and universities outside the capital cities. For true impact, it is important that Erasmus+ funding, and more generally **EU funding goes beyond the capitals of the EaP countries and reaches remote regions.** Equally important is **to create opportunities for students from disadvantaged and underrepresented**

backgrounds to participate in EU-funded activities, such as youth and student exchanges.

- Smaller EU grants should be made available for institutions that do not have the capacity and knowhow to attract large EU grants.
- More generally, as project sustainability is problematic, good projects need additional financial support to ensure their continuity.
- In a post-pandemic context when travel will be viable, the European Commission should assist more with student visas and visas for youth from the EaP countries travelling abroad for exchanges.
- The EU should ensure **effective monitoring and scrutiny of the reach, value and impact of EU funding** in recipient countries. Clear project expectations and indicators of impact should be established and agreed with recipient countries in advance of receiving funds.

Recommendations for national governments in the EaP region

To address the Covid-19 pandemic:

- Proceed with **systematic identification** of children and students without access to ICT equipment (e.g., laptops) and appropriate Internet connection.
- Offer **financial help for purchasing computers and Internet packages** to students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
- In addition to supporting individual learners, national governments should **invest in school and university ICT infrastructure** (such as computers, access to online learning platforms, virtual learning environments, etc.). Online learning platforms should be accessible for people with disabilities (e.g., visual or hearing impairment).
- Given their high risk of contracting Covid-19 during face-to-face teaching, teaching staff should be provided with personal protective equipment (PPE, including masks, hand sanitisers, etc.) and should be given priority in the national programmes of vaccination against Covid-19.
- The government should **launch and incentivise teacher training programmes** at the national level, especially for improving the digital skills of the teaching workforce and introducing teachers at all levels of education to specific pedagogies for online teaching.
- More efforts need to be put into **media literacy** for pupils and students, in order to address fake news and disinformation linked to Covid-19. This will also counteract acceptance of fake news and conspiracy theories in relation to other crisis situations which may arise in future.
- The public authorities should consult student, school, university and parent associations on how to tackle the impacts of the crisis; the role of such non-governmental stakeholders is essential in developing informed and adequate responses to the effects of the pandemic on the education systems. This will in addition foster a consultative and collaborative culture helpful in formulating responses to future crisis situations.

More general recommendations to enhance the education systems in the EaP countries:

- Governments in the EaP countries should fight corruption in education and ensure adequate remuneration of teachers so that they do not have to turn to corruption to meet their economic needs. This would also lead to a decrease in private tutoring, used

by teachers deliberately as an additional source of money (and which implies that classroom teaching is kept at a low or at best average quality to induce the need for private tutoring).

- Governments should establish robust evaluation mechanisms through which to assess student and stakeholder satisfaction with the education system, and monitor the effectiveness of funding and enhancement initiatives. Evaluation systems should collect, collate and analyse objective data to monitor the efficacy of the education system in relation to employability, equality of opportunity and national workforce development needs.
- Governments should ensure that teaching and educational leadership appointments are conducted transparently against clear role descriptions and person specifications.
- Bilateral (joint) universities are a good initiative, and such endeavours should be further continued by the EaP governments with collaborative EU partners.

Recommendations for educational institutions

- Schools and universities should **facilitate and incentivise (financially and through career progression) teacher training,** especially in relation to digital skills and pedagogies for online learning. This would ideally lead to recognition that teaching online is not about recording a lecture and uploading it on the institutional website or using a videoconference platform to deliver the same lecture online as the instructor would give face-to-face.
- Covid-19 should be used as a chance to **revisit traditional student assessment methods** (e.g., final examinations and using instead alternative forms of assessment such as open book, peer reviews, etc.) and work towards assessment aligned to graduate attributes necessary for active citizenship and economic engagement.
- Schools and universities should **offer financial support** (e.g., via scholarships) to students particularly impacted by the pandemic.
- **Reinforcing digital infrastructure** should be a priority for all educational institutions, in order to move from emergency distance teaching to online education.
- A permanent service should be established at all educational institutions to answer student and staff questions related to both technical (e.g., access to online platforms) and content issues (such as for instance student assessment).
- Unless already available, a service for students with disabilities should be set up, accompanied by the production of guidelines for academic staff on the rights of students with disabilities (e.g., extra time for examinations) and practices for their inclusion in higher education.
- Higher education institutions should establish and **strengthen their academic and psychological support systems** for the students who have struggled to adjust to new circumstances imposed by the pandemic.
- National structures should be established to promote collaboration and knowledge exchange. Experiences from other educational systems showed the value of collaboration through national structures such as the national rectors' conferences, which organised sector exchanges on pedagogics and negotiated with the national authorities on support measures for higher education (International Association of Universities, 2020).

Recommendations for civil society organisations (CSOs)

- **CSOs should cooperate with national governments** and coordinate their joint efforts in addressing the impacts of the pandemic. For instance, coordinated actions in delivering ICT equipment or providing Internet connectivity for students at risk could take place.
- Due to their community/grass roots involvement, CSOs are well placed to pro-actively make recommendations to the decision-makers on the potential mitigation measures.
- Given the increase in fake news and overall disinformation, especially on social media, CSOs should **launch awareness raising campaigns on Covid-19** for society at large.
- CSOs should continue to **facilitate peer learning activities** in the EaP countries. For instance, branches of the European Students' Union (ESU) and the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) organised events for knowledge and experience sharing on educational topics demonstrating the impact of Covid-19 on international students exchanges via the Erasmus+ programme. Such peer learning should be continued, being a method that invites reciprocal learning.

Annex 1: Covid-19 in the EaP countries. Survey for stakeholders

This survey is being undertaken by an independent research team commissioned by EaP Civil Society Forum to investigate the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on access to face-to-face and online education in EaP countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine). You will have received this invitation to participate because you are on the stakeholder list of the EaP CSF or because your organisation was considered to hold relevant input for this research.

You are invited to contribute anonymously and all responses will be treated as confidential. The data and responses will be processed and used solely for the purpose of this research and for the subsequent publication of the thematic paper. If you wish to contribute to follow-up interviews or focus groups you can provide your details at the end of the questionnaire. By participating in this survey, you agree with the above. The questionnaire is presented in English, but you can choose to respond in Russian if you prefer.

We anticipate that the survey will take about 15 minutes to complete. Thank you for taking the time to contribute to this research.

The deadline to fill out this survey is **25 January 2021.**

Introductory questions

1. Please tell us in which country you work. *[2]
2. Please tell us the name of institution.
3. Please tell us the type of organisation you work in. *
    - Primary school
    - Secondary school
    - Vocational college
    - Tertiary institute (University or higher education college)
    - Postgraduate or professional institute
    - Private/independent provider
    - Government department
    - Non-governmental organisation (NGO)
    - Other (please say what)

4. Please select the role that best describes your work. *
    - Researcher
    - Teacher
    - Policy maker
    - Youth representative/youth worker
    - Other (please say what)

Infrastructure questions

5. Before Covid-19, what personal IT equipment was provided to you by your organisation? (select all that apply). *
    - Desktop PC for your sole use

[2] Questions marked with * require an answer.

- Access to a shared desktop PC
- Laptop for your sole use
- Access to a shared laptop
- Tablet or iPad for your sole use
- Access to shared tablet or iPad
- Smartphone for your sole use
- Access to shared smartphone
- Other (please say what)
- None of the above

6. What additional equipment has been provided to you since the Covid-19 pandemic, if any? (text response).
7. In your experience what type of equipment do students/youth and volunteers that you are working with usually have access to at home? (select all that apply). *

	Most of the students/youth	Some of the students/youth	Just a few students/youth
Desktop PC for sole use			
Access to a shared desktop PC			
Laptop for sole use			
Access to a shared laptop			
Tablet or iPad			
Access to shared tabled or iPad			
Smartphone for sole use			
Access to shared smartphone			
Other			

8. As far as you know, do students/youth that you are working with have a Wi-Fi connection at home or use mobile internet/data for the same purpose? YES/NO.
9. If yes, is the Wi-Fi connection/mobile internet reliable? YES/NO.

10. If no, please tell us more about this issue. (Text response)
11. What learning technologies are currently supported by your organisation? (select all that apply). *
    - Learning management system (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard)
    - Lecture capture video
    - Lecture capture audio
    - Digital access to library resources (books, journals etc)
    - Digital/remote access to assessment/revision resources
    - Online assessment submission and examinations
    - Online collaborative/meeting tools (such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.)
    - Online quizzes
    - Interactive tools (voting/commenting applications like Poll everywhere, Mentimeter etc)
    - None of the above
    - Other (please say what)

12. How are these facilities managed? (select all that apply)
    - By individual teachers
    - By a central specialist e-learning support team
    - By departmental e-learning specialists
    - Other (please say what)

13. In your experience does the currently available technology meet staff and student demand? YES/NO
14. If not, please tell us more about your experience with this issue. (text response)
15. How are the IT and online platforms learning environments usually funded in your organisation? *
    - Organisation's own funds
    - Government grant
    - Government loan
    - NGO grants
    - NGO loans
    - Industry grants
    - Industry loans
    - Private philanthropy
    - Foreign government or international organisations grants (European Union, World Bank, etc.)
    - Other (please say what)

Covid-19 specific questions

Some of the questions in this section were inspired by the International Association of Universities' (IAU) survey on the impact of Covid-19 on higher education around the world, open from 25 March until 17 April 2020. This will facilitate comparative data analysis between the early pandemic experience and later developments.

16. How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected your organisation? *
    - Our organisation is open as usual, no special measures in place for Covid-19.
    - Our organisation is open as usual, but containment measures have been put in place to avoid spread of Covid-19.

- Our organisation is partially open, but there are major disruptions.
- All our activities moved online.
- All activities have stopped, and the organisation is completely closed.
- Other (please specify)

17. Is the impact of Covid-19 threatening the financial survival or your organisation? *
    - Yes, I am very concerned about this.
    - Yes, I am somehow concerned about it.
    - No, I am not really concerned about it.
    - Not at all, I am very confident about the financial survival of my organisation.
18. Did your government/relevant ministry/governmental agency support your organisation with the disruption caused by Covid-19? *
    - Yes
    - No
    - I do not know/ Not applicable.
19. If yes to Q18, what kind of support has the government/relevant ministry/governmental agency offered your organisation?
    - Financial support
    - In kind (e.g., equipment)
    - Other (please specify)
20. How had Covid-19 impacted your community engagement (e.g., work with youth, disadvantaged groups, etc)?
    - It has not affected it.
    - It has increased our community engagement.
    - It has decreased our community engagement.
    - I do not know.
21. How have the young people and students you work with been affected by Covid-19? (text response)
22. What new activities have you been carrying out since the outbreak of Covid-19? (Open question)
23. In your opinion, what is the major challenge that your organisation has encountered due to Covid-19? (open text)
24. According to you, what is the major opportunity and positive change for your organisation due to Covid-19? (open text)

Capability questions

25. If you are a teacher, how confident are you in using technology in your teaching practice? (0-5 where 0 = not at all confident and 5 is expert)
26. If you are a teacher, what additional teacher training have you received to develop your teaching since becoming a teacher? (text response)
27. If you are a teacher, have you received support or training to develop your confidence in using technology in your teaching practice? YES/NO
28. If yes, please tell us what type of support or training you received (text response).
29. To what extent do you incorporate employability and entrepreneurship skills into your formal or non-formal education practice? * (0-5 where 0 = not at all and 5 to a great extent)

30. Thinking about the conversations you have with students and young people, how confident do you feel when student wellbeing issues (e.g., depression, anxiety, abuse) arise? (0-5 where 0 = not at all confident and 5 is expert)
31. How do these conversations impact your own wellbeing and resilience?
    - I welcome the opportunity to help students.
    - I am comfortable that I know where to signpost for specialist help.
    - I am unsettled because I don't know where to signpost students for help.
    - I feel distressed by issues I don't know how to address.
    - I do not recognise this as part of my role.
32. What support would you welcome when difficult or distressing issues are raised? (text response)
33. Please tell us about the training and development you think would be useful to you as teacher/youth worker to enhance your practice and the support you provide to students/young people? (text response)
34. If there is anything you would like to add about the issues covered in this survey, please add them here. (text response)
35. If you would like to contribute to follow-up interviews or focus groups, please provide us with the following information so that we can assign you to the relevant discussion group: name, organisation, role, country and email address.

Thank you for your time in completing this survey.

Annex 2: Covid-19 in the EaP countries. Student survey

This survey is being undertaken by an independent research team commissioned by EaP Civil Society Forum (CSF) to investigate the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on access to face-to-face and online education in the EaP countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine). You will have received this invitation to participate through your local student or youth organisation. You are invited to contribute anonymously and all responses will be treated as confidential. The data and responses will be processed and used solely for the purpose of this research and for the subsequent publication of the thematic paper. If you wish to contribute to follow-up interviews or focus groups you can provide your details at the end of the questionnaire. The questionnaire is presented in English but you can choose to respond in Russian if you prefer.

We anticipate that the survey will take about 15 minutes to complete. Thank you for taking the time to contribute to this research.

The deadline to answer this survey is **25 January 2021.**

Questions:

1. Please tell us the country where you are studying in.*[3]
2. Please tell us the name of the institution you are currently studying at.
3. Please tell us the type of organisation you study in: *
   - Secondary school/high school
   - Vocational education college
   - Tertiary institute (University or higher education college)
   - Postgraduate or professional institute
   - Other (please say what)

Infrastructure questions

4. What personal IT equipment do you use at school or university? (select all that apply). Please indicate if you provide this equipment yourself or if it is provided by your school or university, a government department, an NGO, or a sponsoring employer. *

			Provided by		
	Yourself	Your school or university	A government department	An NGO	Sponsoring employer
Desktop PC for sole use					
Access to a shared desktop PC					
Laptop for sole use					

[3] Questions marked with * require an answer.

Access to a shared laptop					
Tablet or iPad for sole use					
Access to shared tabled or iPad					
Smartphone for sole use					
Access to shared smartphone					
Other					

5. Does your school or University provide Wi-Fi? * YES/NO
6. If yes, is the Wi-Fi connection reliable? YES/NO
7. If no, please tell us more about this issue.
8. What learning technologies are currently supported by your school or university? (select all that apply) *
    - Learning management system (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard)
    - Lecture capture video
    - Lecture capture audio
    - Digital access to library resources (books, journals etc)
    - Digital/remote access to assessment/revision resources
    - Online assessment submission and examinations
    - Online collaborative/meeting tools (such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.)
    - Online quizzes
    - Interactive tools (voting/commenting applications like Poll everywhere, Mentimeter etc.)
    - None of the above
    - Other (please say what)

9. What training have you received to help you use the learning technologies available to you? (text response)
10. Do you know where to go for help if you are having difficulty with your IT equipment or access to online learning? YES/NO.
11. To what extent are you satisfied with the technology available? *
    (Answer options: Very unsatisfied; unsatisfied; neutral; satisfied; very satisfied)

Learning experience

The following questions inspired by UK NSS survey. This will facilitate comparative data analysis between pre-Covid, early pandemic and later changes in students' experiences. Please answer these questions in light of your experience before the outbreak of Covid-19.

For each of the questions below, students answer with the following choices:

Definitely agree; Mostly agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Mostly disagree; Definitely disagree; Not applicable.

12. Please rate the teaching in your programme (BA, MA, PhD, short courses, etc.), in general.
    a. Staff are good at explaining things.
    b. Staff have made the subject interesting.
    c. My courses are intellectually stimulating.
    d. My courses have challenged me to achieve my best work.

13. In terms of learning opportunities**:**
    a. My programme has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth.
    b. My programme has provided me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different topics.
    c. My programme has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt.

14. Assessment and feedback:
    a. The criteria used in marking (i.e., grading) have been clear in advance.
    b. Marking and assessment has been fair.
    c. Feedback on my work has been timely.
    d. I have received helpful comments on my work.

15. Academic support**:**
    a. I have been able to contact staff when I needed to.
    b. I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my courses.
    c. Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices on my programme.

16. In general, before Covid-19:
    a. My courses were well organised and running smoothly.
    b. My timetable worked efficiently for me.
    c. Any changes in my courses or teaching were communicated effectively.

17. Learning resources:
    a. The IT resources and facilities provided have supported my learning well.
    b. The library resources (e.g., books, online services and learning spaces) have supported my learning well.
    c. I have been able to access course-specific resources (e.g., equipment, facilities, software, collections) when I needed to.

18. Learning community:
    a. I feel part of a community of staff and students.

b. I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my programme.

19. Student voice:
    a. I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my courses.
    b. Staff value students' views and opinions about the course.
    c. It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on.
    d. The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests.

20. Overall, I am satisfied with the learning experience provided by my school or university **pre-Covid-19.** *

21. Overall, I am satisfied with the learning experience provided by my school or university after **the start of Covid-19.** *

Covid-19 specific questions

The following questions are taken from the survey "Student life during the Covid-19 pandemic" conducted in April 2020 by the European Students Union, the Institute for the Development of Education and an interdisciplinary team of researchers from the University of Zadar, Croatia. This will facilitate comparative data analysis between pre-Covid, early pandemic and later changes in students' experiences.

22. Have your on-site classes (i.e., those taking place at the campus/location of the university) been cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic? *
    - No, my on-site classes have not been cancelled.
    - Yes, my on-site classes have been cancelled.
    - Not applicable (e.g., I do not have classes this semester/term).

23. In view of the Covid-19 pandemic, to what extent do you agree with the following statements: *

    Please answer with one of the following options: strongly agree; agree; neither agree nor disagree; disagree; strongly disagree

    - My performance as a student has changed for the better since the Covid-19 pandemic;
    - My performance as a student has changed for the worse since the Covid-19 pandemic.

24. Which of these forms of online lectures has been the most dominant? (single choice)
    - Online with the lecturer lecturing in real time.
    - Online with a video recording of the lecturer lecturing.
    - Online with an audio recording of the lecturer lecturing.
    - Lectures have been replaced by lecturers sending their presentations to students.
    - No online lectures have been organised.

- Not applicable, e.g. I do not have lectures this term/semester, my on-site classes have not been cancelled, etc.
- Other (please specify).

25. Please rate your agreement with the following statements (by answering with one of the following options: strongly agree; agree; neither agree nor disagree; disagree; strongly disagree; not applicable).

Since on-site classes were cancelled, my lecturers:

- Have provided course assignments (e.g., readings, homework, quizzes) on a regular basis
- Have provided feedback on my performance on given assignments
- Have responded to my questions in a timely manner
- Have been open to students' suggestions and adjustments of online classes
- Have informed me on what exams will look like in this new situation

26. In your home, do you have access to the following: *

A quiet place to study	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
A desk					
A computer					
A good internet connection					
Course study material (e.g., compulsory and recommended literature)					

27. Please rate how you have felt since the outbreak of Covid-19 in your country. Answer with one of the following options: all of the time; a good bit of the time; some of the time; a little of the time; none of the time

- I have felt bothered by nervousness or "nerves"
- I have had or felt a lot of energy or vitality
- I have felt downhearted and blue
- I have been emotionally stable and sure of myself

- I have felt cheerful, lighthearted
- I have felt tired, worn out, used up, or exhausted

28. How often are any of the following circumstances a worry for you at the moment?

How to cover the costs of study?	All of the time	Most of the time	A good part of the time	Some of the time	A little of the time
How to cover the costs of living (e.g. accommodation, food, bills)?					
How to balance care responsibilities (for children, family members or others) with studying?					
Your health?					

29. What problems have you encountered with studying from home? (Open text)

30. If there is something important about your student experience during the COVID-19 pandemic which has not been covered in this questionnaire, please use this space to write it down (Open text)

31. Would you be willing to contribute to follow-up interviews or focus groups?

Yes/No

32. If yes, please provide the following so we can assign you to the most relevant discussion group: name, school/university, education sector, country, email address.

Thank you for your time completing this survey!

Annex 3: Addressing disadvantage in the EaP's educational systems

This is an overview of the existing national legislation in the EaP countries in terms of defining and addressing disadvantage. This overview has a focus on higher education and was adapted from the following source: https://supporthere.org/sites/default/files/sphere_icm_report_final.pdf

Country	Overarching national legislation	HE-specific legislation	Observations
Armenia	Yes	Yes	Government decision of 2012 which regulates the admission to HE of certain categories of disadvantaged students: students with disabilities; students whose parents fought in the war against Azerbaijan; students who fought in the 2016 war in Nagorno Karabakh; students with two or more children. These students are given a fee waiver. In addition, according to the Law on HE, the state obliges Armenian HEIs to use at least 7% of the revenue from tuition fees to fund scholarships.
Azerbaijan	Yes	Yes	National legislation makes provision for the physically disabled, according to legal texts available in English. The state pays tuition fees on behalf of internally displaced persons (IDPs). *Law on prevention of disablement, rehabilitation and social security of disabled persons, 1997 (EN)*
Belarus	N/A	N/A	N/A
Georgia		Yes	National legislation makes provision for the physically disabled, according to legal texts available in English. HE legislation is embedded in declarations of fundamental human rights. Beyond the physically disabled, policies target speakers of minority languages and residents of the contested areas in which hostilities have taken place. To these, Georgia gives financial support in the form of a fee waiver; the support

			does not cover maintenance. Georgia also gives special consideration (which includes a pre-entry year of Georgian language tuition) to Abkhazi, Armenian, Azerbaijani and South Ossetian students on a quota basis.
Moldova	Yes	Yes	National legislation makes provision for the physically disabled, according to legal texts available in English. Each academic programme has an entry quota of 15% reserved for the physically disabled, orphans and Transnistrian students. 1. *The Law on the social inclusion of people with disabilities, 2012, http://lex.justice.md/md/344149/ (RO)* *2. The Regulation on the organization of the Cycle II, 2015, http://lex.justice.md/md/360103/ (RO)* *3. The REGULATION FRAMEWORK on the terms and conditions for the granting of scholarships for 1st cycle, 2nd cycle, integrated HE, medical and pharmaceutical education in HEIs, post-secondary and post-secondary nontertiary and secondary vocational technical education institutions and postgraduate students, 2006* *http://lex.justice.md/document_rom.php?id=F38E355D:76FC33F4 (RO)* *4. The Framework Regulation on Organising admission in the Cycle I -Bachelor's degree, 2014* *https://mecc.gov.md/sites/default/files/regulament_de_organizare_si_desfasurare_a_admiterii_in_institutiile_de_invatamint_superior_din_republica_moldova.compressed.pdf (RO)*
Ukraine	Yes	Yes	HE legislation is embedded in declarations of fundamental human rights. Financial support is given to IDPs, as well as to students from families of military personnel active in the Donbass, and Roma. The Law on HE embraces a wider definition of disadvantage and allows access to be facilitated by entry quotas and by the boosting of entry grades. Beneficiaries have to be in possession of documentation certifying their disadvantage. *Law "On Higher Education" (01.07.14), Arts. 3, 4, 9, 32, 33 https://zakon1.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1556-18 (Ukrainian)* *Law "On Education" (05.09.17), Arts. 6, 8, 20, 41, 48, 56* *https://zakon2.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2 145-19 (Ukrainian)*

Annex 4: Interview participants

Those interview participants who gave explicit consent for their comments to be attributed to them are listed below:

Esma Gumberidze, Young European Ambassador, Georgia
Esma is Georgia's Youth Representative to the United Nations, EU4Youth Alumni network member and a Young European Ambassador. After graduating with honours from a public school for the blind in Tbilisi, she went to the US as a FLEX student. There she first experienced volunteering. She tutored several blind children in elementary school and upon her return to Georgia in 2013, she continued volunteering, for instance, at GLOW and other teenage camps as a counsellor conducting discussions and trainings on women's rights, project development and management, future planning, the rights of persons with disabilities, volunteerism, and youth exchange programmes.

Ana Sikhashvili, Young European Ambassador, Georgia

Ana is 19 years old and graduated high school last spring (2020). Currently, she is a first-year student in Social and Political Sciences, in Tbilisi. She is also a FLEX-Alumni, having studied for a year in the USA. Her involvement with volunteer activities was recognised through a national award given by Georgia's Youth Agency. The award reflects her initiative to create a training course for spreading awareness about people with disabilities.

Nensi Mkrtchyan, Young European Ambassador, Armenia

Nensi is a young activist, having been involved in volunteering activities with many NGOs in Armenia. In 2018, she was selected as Young European Ambassador by EU Neighbors East and currently, she is involved in the EU4Youth Alumni network to engage youth with limited access to community-based opportunities. Since graduating, she is still interested in educational reforms and champions students' rights. Currently, Nensi is the President of the newly established candidate section of Erasmus Student Network Yerevan. In 2020, she was an intern at the National Assembly of Armenia, within the internship program of the National Democracy Institute in Armenia.

Tetyana Fedorchuk, Erasmus Student Network, Ukraine

Tetyana is 25 years old and originally from Zhytomyr, Ukraine. She moved to Kyiv to get her higher education. She was the Head of the Student Union of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, and co-founder of the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) in Ukraine. She did an Erasmus+ semester abroad, European Solidarity Corps volunteering in Slovakia and she is now an international student in Italy.

Dzmitry Herylovich, RADA, Policy Officer, Belarus

Dzmitry is working as Policy Officer at the Belarusian National Youth Council "RADA".

Anastasia Esanu, Republic of Moldova

Anastasia is a junior expert in public diplomacy and strategic communication, being a Young European Ambassadors Communication Coordinator at the EU Neighbours East project. She holds a Bachelor's Degree in International Relations and a Master's Degree in

European Studies. She has been engaged in youth related activities in Moldova and in the Eastern Partnership region for more than 5 years.

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