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Learning and teaching in situations of crisis: needs and support provision

Thematic Peer Group Report

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Introduction:
about this report

The report shares the results of the 2024 Thematic Peer Group on "Learning and teaching in situations of crises: needs and support provision" (hereafter "the group", see Annex for more information). Crises, such as pandemics, natural disasters, political and armed conflicts, as well as technological disruptions, significantly affect universities and the quality of their education, resulting in a potential disruption of its delivery. In the wake of recent global and European crises, institutions are reassessing their vulnerabilities. The European University Association (EUA) Trends 2024 survey reveals that nearly half (48%) of European university leaders anticipate a sustained focus on institutional emergency preparedness and crisis management, a lasting consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic.[1] The Council of Europe adopted the Education Resilience Principles at the 26th Session of the Conference of Ministers of Education, held on 28–29 September 2023. The EDURES[2] platform serves as a toolkit that incorporates resilience strategies, which are designed to ensure the continuity of quality education during emergencies and crises. These strategies are grounded in specific principles aimed at fostering resilience in education during such challenging times. This report explores how universities can mitigate the adverse effects of various crises, build resilience and adaptability, and develop preparedness strategies to ensure the continuation of their educational missions. The report presents a synthesised reflection drawn from notes and discussions spanning a 10-month period.

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1   https://www.eua.eu/publications/reports/trends-2024.html (accessed 17/01/2025).
2   https://eduresplatform.org/ (accessed 17/01/2025).

The group convened three times – once online and twice in person – with each meeting anchored by a fundamental inquiry: What shall we understand by "crisis"? Derived from the Greek word *krísis*, meaning "decision" or "turning point",[3] crisis situations inherently entail change, assessment, decision-making and departure from established norms. The discussion among the group's members clearly mirrored this in identifying various elements of crisis situations. These include the inherently negative aspects of crisis situations, such as unpredictability, uncertainty and threat, but also the positive reactions that can result from such situations, such as support, teamwork and reorganisation. There was an agreement that all crisis situations call for decision, change and transition into a more stable state. Based on the key elements of crises, the group also adopted a concise yet comprehensive definition, which led its further work: "(…) crisis [is] an intense shock or imminent threat that has severe and wide-ranging impacts and requires urgent response".[4] It was acknowledged that crises can vary significantly in scope and impact, ranging from widespread catastrophes affecting entire systems and countries to localised events. Moreover, when two or more crises, each characterized by different factors and elements, coincide, cascade, or compound one another, complex polycrises can arise, further challenging institutions and their learning and teaching provision.

Crises can emerge subtly and almost imperceptibly. The account of a simple crack in the pillar of a Spanish university's lecture hall vividly illustrated the challenges of crisis anticipation and the critical importance of collective and individual action. A single professor's keen observation, coupled with the university leadership's swift and decisive response, led to the building's evacuation within hours, followed by weeks of reconstruction[5]. Such an incident exemplifies the complex nature of crises, but also the need to enhance crisis awareness - the ability to recognise the signs of a crisis. Other crises can be anticipated, pointing to the importance of crisis foresight. This illustrates that it is important to distinguish between different crisis types and recognise their unique challenges. Consequently, the group categorised crises based on their impact on learning and teaching: some temporarily interrupt educational activities, while others demand fundamental changes in delivery modes, such as transitioning to online or hybrid formats.

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3   The etymology of the word "crisis" refers to a decisive state, originally in a disease, the "point at which change must come, for better or worse". It stems from the Greek *krísis*, related to the verb *krínein*, meaning "to judge" and also implying decision or separation. See https://www.etymonline.com/word/crisis and https://etymology.net/crisis/ (accessed 17/01/2025).

4   *Scoping paper. Strategic crisis management in the EU. Improving EU crisis prevention, preparedness, response and resilience*, 2021, p. 2. https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-07/scoping-paper_crisis-management-in-the-eu_june_2021.pdf (accessed 17/01/2025).

5   As happened at the University San Pablo CEU in 2015, which is a participating member of the TPG.

Crises affecting higher education institutions and their education provision: bucket or ladder?

The group proceeded to explore the wide range of crises faced by higher education institutions, going beyond those they had personally experienced. This exploration uncovered a broad spectrum of crisis situations, with a selected few illustrated below in no particular order or sequence.

Planetary Crisis		Interconnected Multiple Crises (Polycrises)	
Wars & Armed Conflict		Economic / Financial Crises	
Health Crises (Epidemics / Pandemics)		Social Crises	
Natural Calamities		Technological Crises	
Political Interventions		Cyber-security Risks	
Legal Constraints		Infrastructural Crises	

Evidentially, these crises may require very different responses and management approaches, depending also on the actual impact on the university under specific circumstances. In discussing the impact that crises had on institutions, the group explored a taxonomy or typology of different crises, distinguishing among others:

◆ human-made versus natural disasters, and the different factors that might impact them;

◆ geographical scope of crises and their effects on learning and teaching, leading to the following classification of impact levels: global, national, regional, institutional, departmental and individual;

◆ temporal aspects and longevity of crises:
   • short term, long term or continuous
   • sudden versus slow-burning crises
   • long tail effect (both temporally and spatially);

Crises could have an impact on just one or several individuals, or the institution, its surrounding region, the country or globally. This, in turn, impacts the crisis management and the need to coordinate with actors outside of learning and teaching, and even outside the university. It may even require organising the institution's crisis management within a framework and under conditions that are set externally, such as by international organisations (e.g. World Health Organization), governments (state and local), higher education institutions, civil society, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), non-profit organisations (NPOs), communities of interest, communities of practice and learning communities. Furthermore, some crises can be politically sensitive, thus changing the nature of the crisis and necessary crisis management strategies. To visualise the complex interrelationships among these various factors and elements, the group developed a matrix system with iconic representations for each component. This systematic approach enabled better understanding of the interconnected nature of crisis elements and responses within higher education contexts.

Level of Crisis

Global	National	Regional	Institutional	Departmental	Individual

Level of Responses

Global	National	Regional	Institutional	Departmental	Individual

Longevity / Temporality of Crisis

Short Term	Long Term	Sudden	Ongoing	Slow-Burning	Long-Tail

Types of Crisis

Health Crisis	Legal Constraints	Interconnected Multiple Crisis	Natural Calamities	Wars & Armed Conflict	Economic Crisis	Planetary Crisis
Social Crisis	Technological Crisis	Cyber Security Risks	Political Investments	Infrastructural Crisis	Violence on Campus	

Response Groups

HEIs	Governments	International Organisations	NPOs	NGOs
Learning Communities	Civil Society	Communities of Practice	Communities of Interest	

The full matrix and definitions can be accessed on the website of the group chair, Yeditepe University.[6]

The "bucket or ladder" metaphor illustrates the critical importance of task allocation and preparedness during a crisis. Inspired by a Transylvanian village without a fire station, where each house is labelled in accordance with its specific role in responding to an unexpected fire – whether bringing a bucket or a ladder – the concept emphasises strategic preparedness.

The group found this metaphor readily transferable to the university context, as it exemplifies an agreed scheme of task-sharing, mutual trust and solidarity. Consequently, institutions should proactively identify personnel and allocate budgets for potential unexpected crises. The group recommended developing a comprehensive checklist or "first aid book" for initial crisis response, highlighting the significance of swift initiative and decisive leadership during challenging times.

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6   See https://yulearnt.yeditepe.edu.tr/sites/default/files/EUA-TPG2024-MatrixandIcons.pdf (accessed 17/01/2025).

Results of the leadership survey

The focus on decisive and effective leadership led the group to conduct a survey[7] among the senior management of the seven participating institutions, gathering insights into their experiences, perspectives and priorities.

Leadership and community play a critical role during crisis situations, where extraordinary circumstances rigorously test leadership capabilities. Effective crisis management hinges on fundamental principles such as equality, solidarity, transparency and mutual goodwill. The resilience of organisations and communities becomes particularly evident during challenging times, with the Covid-19 pandemic serving as a prime example of how institutions adapt to unprecedented disruptions, including the sudden loss of traditional campus life. Recognising that each crisis demands unique solutions, leaders must remain adaptable, ensure generic preparedness and develop targeted strategies that address the specific challenges of each distinct situation.

Building upon the group's existing crisis categorisation, crises were further distinguished between foreseeable and unforeseeable scenarios. When surveyed about the most probable crises facing their institutions, leaders identified technological disruptions as the most prevalent concern, followed closely by public health emergencies and financial challenges. Additionally, three institutions acknowledged the potential indirect impacts of war, armed conflict, and broader political and social upheavals as significant probable risks. The circles around each icon represent the number of senior leaders from participating group member institutions who selected that option in the survey, as shown below.

It is striking that a technological crisis, while identified as the most probable one, is not imagined as the one with the highest impact. This may reflect the actual experience of institutions, and possibly also the fact that problems with technology – such as non-functioning infrastructure, computer viruses and cyber-attacks – may occur more frequently, but are often of shorter duration and somewhat easier to solve or mitigate than other crises, such as health and financial crises, wars and armed conflict, social crises and political intervention, respectively, as shown below.

7   The questionnaire was developed by a working group established within the TPG. Two online meetings were held to fine-tune the questions. Via a Google Form the questionnaire was circulated in English, Spanish and Ukrainian language among the senior leaders of the participating institutions. Results were analysed, and shared them with the larger group. Graphs have been prepared separately to accommodate the analysis. The questionnaire can be accessed via https://yulearnt.yeditepe.edu.tr/sites/default/files/EUA%20TPG%20L%20%26%20T%20in%20crisis%20situations%20University%20Crisis%20Preparedness%20Questionnaire.pdf (accessed 17/01/2025).

When asked about the most challenging crises experienced recently, one institution cited war, another mentioned a financial crisis, and the remaining five institutions pointed to public health emergencies – most likely reflecting the recent Covid-19 pandemic.

Four of the seven institutions had a crisis management plan or policy in place when experiencing the crisis identified as most challenging (Graph 1). These were usually developed by an internal crisis management team, with only one institution relying on external support. Of the three universities without a plan, two developed one after the crisis, with one receiving external assistance. The third university still lacks a formal policy or plan. None of the institutions collaborated with public authorities in this process.

Institutional Policies Prior to a Challenging Crisis

3 Institutions without a Policy in Place
4 Institutions with a Policy in Place

Policies Developed Prior to the Challenging Crisis

1 Policy Developed with External Assistance
3 Policies Developed by an Internal Crisis Management Team

Institutional Policies After a Challenging Crisis

2 Policies Developed after a Challenging Crisis
1 Institution Still without a Crisis Management Plan

Policies Developed After the Challenging Crisis

1 Policy Developed Internally
1 Policy Developed with External Assistance

Graph 1. Q6: Did your institution have a crisis management plan/policy in place prior to experiencing the above selected as most challenging crisis? If yes, who developed it and how?
Q8: Does your institution have a crisis management plan or strategy now? If yes, who developed it and how?

In navigating crisis situations, based on insights from senior leaders, institutions prioritise a strategic response: first, comprehensively assessing immediate risks and potential impacts; second, communicating critically with key stakeholders including students, staff and community; and third, mobilising emergency response teams. The graph below shows how leaders ranked their first actions in a crisis situation (Graph 2). The crisis management plan is not a static manual, but a dynamic framework that pre-emptively establishes clear responsibilities and protocols. This approach emphasises preparedness, swift communication and adaptive decision-making during unexpected challenges.
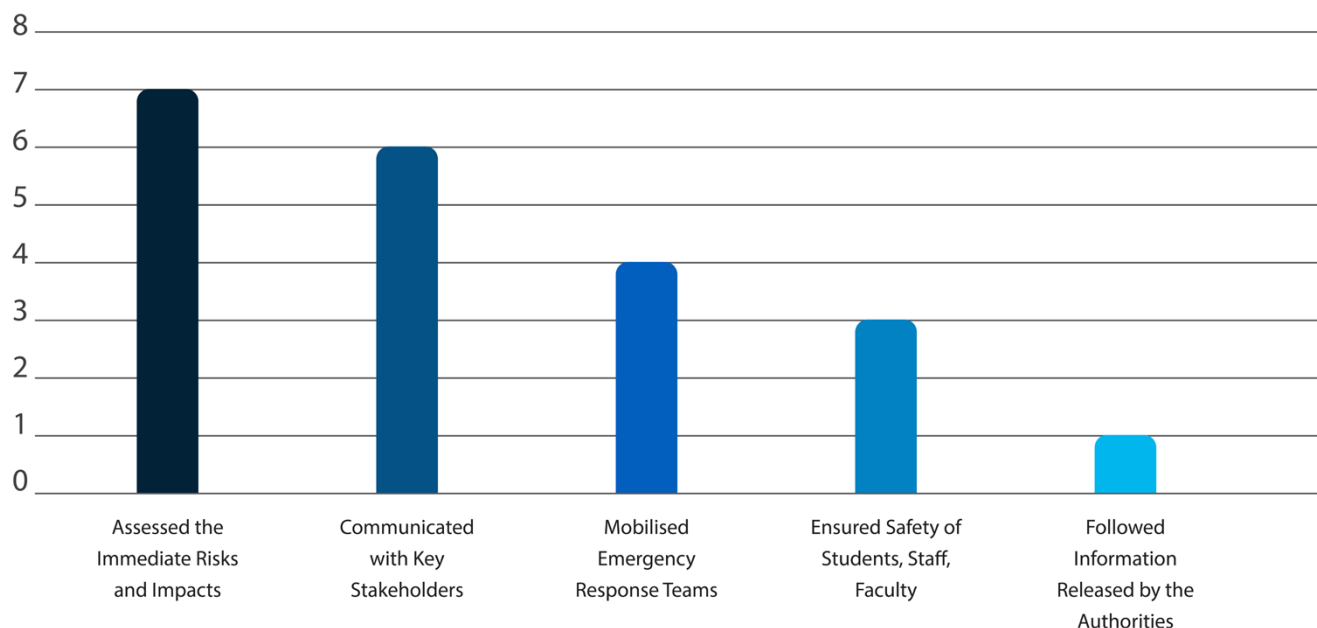
Graph 2. Q9: When a crisis situation first arose, what immediate actions were taken by your institution? (Please rate these actions according to their urgency, with 1 being the most urgent)

In response to the question regarding their institution's preparedness to ensure the continuity of learning and teaching during a crisis, respondents expressed strong confidence, with ratings ranging from high (5) to medium (3) on a five-point scale (Graph 3). This self-assessment suggests that the multiple crisis experiences each institution has navigated have demonstrated the tangible benefits of proactive preparation and the potential to effectively mitigate crisis impacts. Their collective experience highlights the critical importance of strategic planning and adaptive response mechanisms in managing complex institutional challenges.
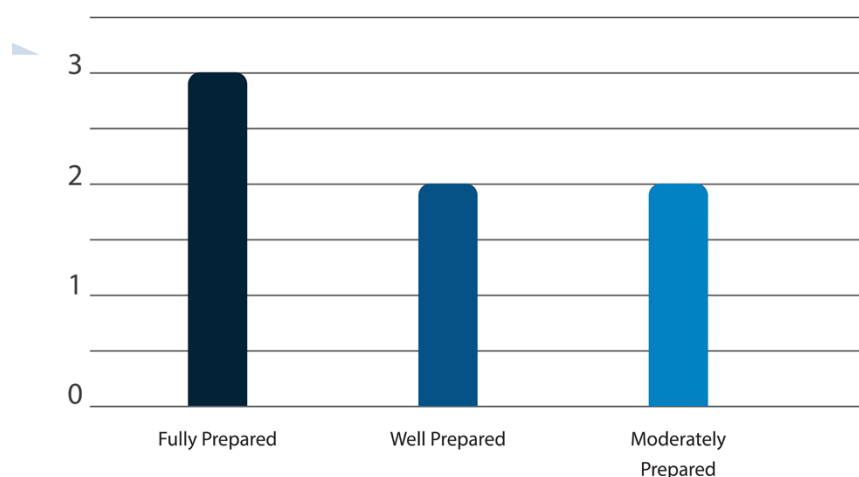

Graph 3. Q10: In your opinion, to what extent is the institution you are leading prepared to ensure the continuity of learning and teaching in the case of a crisis? (Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being fully prepared.)

When analysing the average priority rankings of support mechanisms essential for ensuring the continuity of learning and teaching during crises, respondents most frequently selected digital infrastructure, followed by technological communication tools, and comprehensive training for both staff and students. The graph below illustrates these response frequencies across all priority levels (Graph 4).
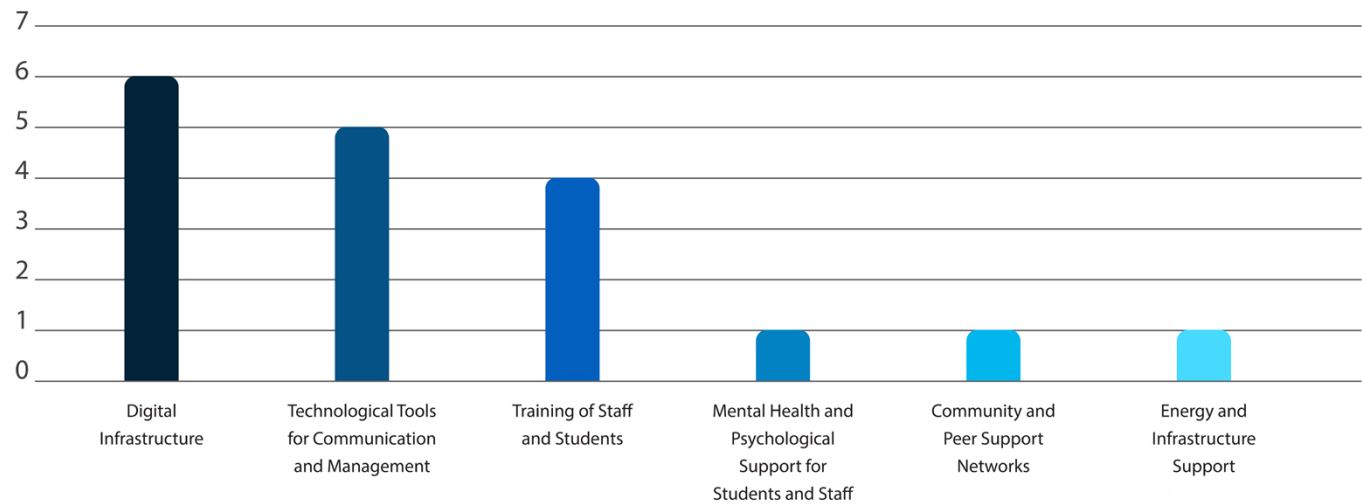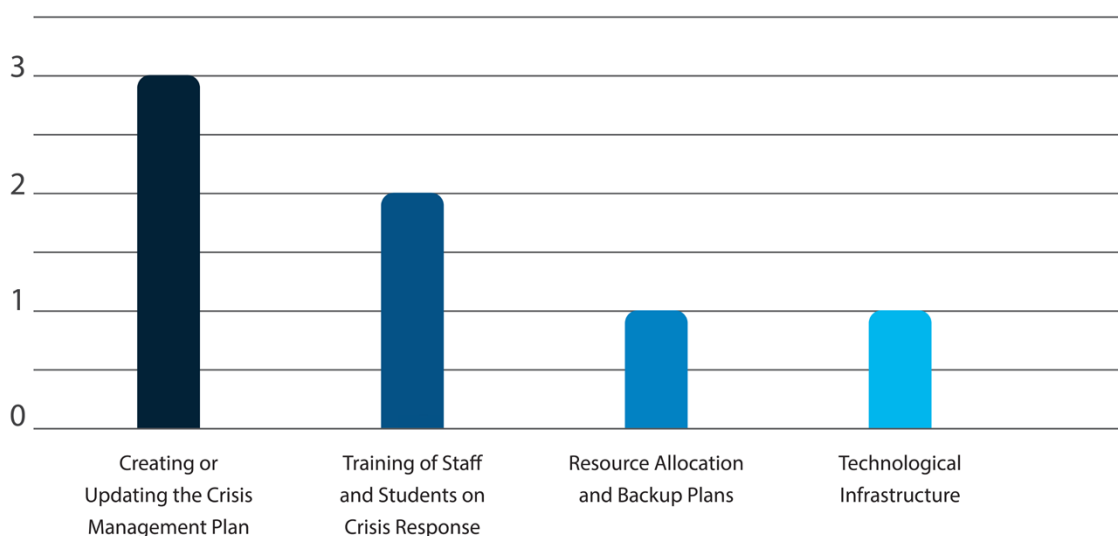

Graph 4. Q11: What kinds of support mechanisms should be implemented to ensure the continuity of learning and teaching activities in crisis situations? (Please rate the options in order of priority, with 1 being the highest priority)

However, when examining which options were most frequently selected as the highest priority (ranked as 1), a different pattern emerged. Mental health and psychological support for staff and students shared the top position with comprehensive staff and student training, receiving an equal number of first-priority selections. This alternative view, as shown in the graph below, emphasises the fundamental importance of human wellbeing and preparedness in institutional crisis management strategies for sustaining learning and teaching (Graph 5).
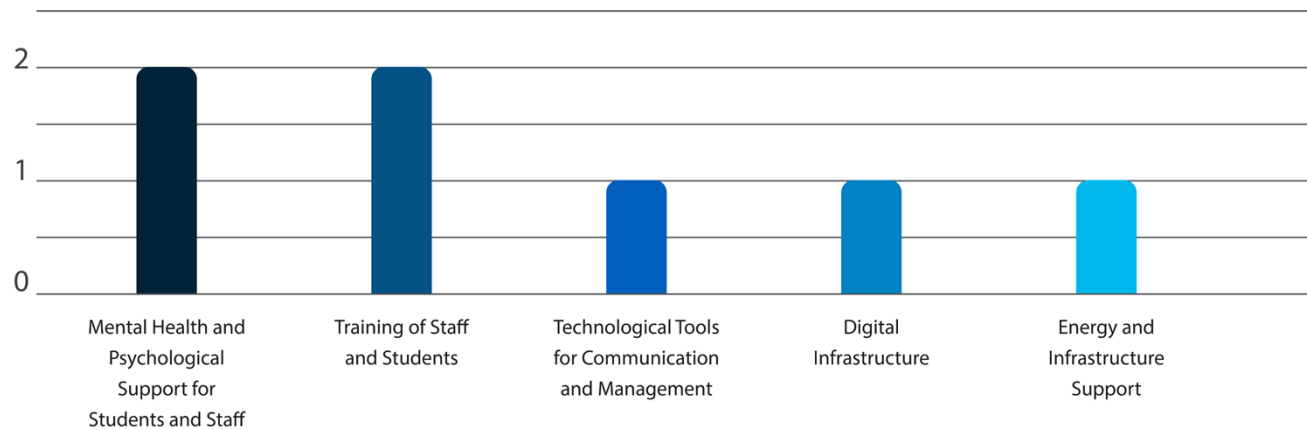
Graph 5. Q11: What kinds of support mechanisms should be implemented to ensure the continuity of learning and teaching activities in crisis situations? (Please rate the options in order of priority, with 1 being the highest priority)

In refining their crisis management strategies, senior leaders identified four key measures, with varying levels of priority: creating or updating crisis management plans, training for staff and students in crisis response, resource allocation backup plans, and technological infrastructure. The development and refinement of crisis management plans emerged as the most frequently chosen first priority (selected by three respondents), followed by training for staff and students (chosen by two respondents), whilst resource allocation backup plans and technological infrastructure were each selected as the top priority by one respondent (Graph 6). This varied distribution reflects the complex nature of crisis preparedness in educational settings, whilst the emphasis on formal management plans indicates an institutional recognition that systematic frameworks provide the foundation for responding to unforeseen challenges, regardless of their nature or context.

Graph 6. Q12: Based on your experiences, which of the following areas would you prioritise to improve your institution's crisis management strategy to ensure the continuum of learning and teaching activities in crisis situations? (Please rank the options in order of priority)

Institutional crisis experiences as point of departure:
not to reinvent the wheel

The senior leaders of the participating institutions also shared some insights into how well their institutions handled the crises and the challenges they caused. The group members of these institutions then elaborated on the specific actions taken by their universities to tackle the challenges caused by these crises. The group structured their discussion into two distinct parts: first, examining the actions taken during the Covid-19 pandemic as a common crisis experience shared by all institutions, and second, exploring the unique crisis experiences of individual institutions within their specific contexts. For many institutions, the experience gained during the pandemic accelerated decision-making and action-taking processes, as they were able to build upon existing strategies rather than starting from scratch, thus avoiding the need to reinvent the wheel.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC – EXAMPLE OF A GLOBAL CRISIS

Central European University (Austria) took multiple steps to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning, despite a challenging health situation and evolving government regulations, which had a particularly acute impact on the university's highly international staff and students. The university invested heavily in the infrastructure of fully online, fully in-person and hybrid classroom environments, while the centre for teaching and learning and the information technology (IT) department provided support for faculty and teaching assistants teaching in different modalities. Special attention was paid to meeting the needs of vulnerable students, for example through psychological support, equipment, staff training, and incorporating appropriate forms of flexibility in policies.

Erasmus University Rotterdam (The Netherlands) decided in 2020 – among many other crisis measures – to introduce online proctoring and to scale up digital assessment to avoid study delays for students. Online proctoring was already a small project as part of the Community for Learning & Innovation (CLI). It was immediately scaled up thanks to the active community members of all schools and professional services within the CLI. Students were heavily concerned about privacy issues because other Dutch universities were collaborating with American suppliers, not taking the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) into account. Erasmus University was able to reassure the students in the end, since it was using a Dutch online proctoring system.

VID Specialised University (Norway) responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by supporting staff and students in adapting to digital learning and teaching technologies. The university also decided to continue practice education in the nursing programme, in collaboration with external institutions, implementing various educational adjustments while addressing the added challenges that this required given the circumstances. Recognising the importance of communication, the university emphasised the need for both structure and accessibility, highlighting the significance of digital preparedness within the broader context of European society. It became clear that a balance must be struck between crisis readiness and the careful management of critical information, as certain details can be challenging to share without exacerbating the situation.

University San Pablo CEU (Spain) successfully resumed classes online within 24 hours of the national lockdown announcement. To facilitate this transition, a peer support group was formed[8] to assist those with less IT proficiency, ensuring that everyone could adapt smoothly to the new virtual environment. The rectoral team maintained constant communication with the entire university community to guarantee the continuity of teaching and learning activities. Additionally, internationalisation efforts for national students were preserved through virtual exchange programmes,[9] providing them with opportunities to engage globally despite the restrictions.

Dalarna University (Sweden) took immediate action by closing the campus, pivoting to online teaching and assessment, and generally, as much as possible, limiting physical social interaction. The switch to online teaching was facilitated by the fact that a significant part of the university's education was provided online prior to the pandemic. The university established a crisis management team consisting mainly of senior management from across disciplines, functions and positions. The team's task was to assess the situation, identify needs and help to develop, as much as possible, tailored response approaches.

Simon Kuznets Kharkiv National University of Economics (Ukraine) had already established digital learning technologies before the pandemic, implementing a three-level course model based on Moodle: content-based, interactive and autonomous. Almost all teachers had course materials on the Learning Management System, which supports 131,000 users and over 4,000 courses, including 1,557 certified courses. During the crisis, online lectures were held via Zoom and Skype. The university also recognised informal education by adopting a formal policy and partnering with Coursera to provide free licences for students and faculty. In the first three months of the pandemic, 436 participants completed 1,311 course registrations and spent over 5,886 hours learning. Specifically, 229 completed at least one course, 57 completed two courses, and 50 completed more than two courses, including international students.

Yeditepe University (Türkiye) suspended campus operations in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and transitioned to remote education and learning processes. In this context, courses across the university's different faculties continued online through applications such as Moodle, Google Meet and Zoom, delivered in both synchronous and asynchronous formats. Internships at university hospitals and practice-based courses across the university continued after obtaining the "Safe Campus Certificate", following the implementation of necessary safety measures. The Learning and Teaching Implementation and Research Centre prepared a Response Report for Spring[10] and a Response Report for Fall[11] in 2021 to document and explain the response strategies and protocols for educational activities.

8 *Las universidades CEU, un ejemplo de adaptación digital de cara al coronavirus*. https://www.20minutos.es/noticia/4266241/0/las-universidades-ceu-ejemplo-adaptacion-digital-cara-al-coronavirus (accessed 17/01/2025).

9 *An innovative teaching methodology for online internationalization*. https://www.uspceu.com/en/international/coil (accessed 17/01/2025).

10 *Coronavirus/Covid-19 Pandemic Period Learning and Teaching Response Report 1: Spring 2021*. https://yulearnt.yeditepe.edu.tr/sites/default/files/Covid-19%20Teaching%20and%20Learning%20Report%201%20-%20ENG_0.pdf (accessed 17/01/2025).

11 *Coronavirus/Covid-19 Pandemic Period Learning and Teaching Response Report 2: Fall 2021*. https://yulearnt.yeditepe.edu.tr/sites/default/files/Covid-19%20Response%20Report%20Spring%202%20-%20Eng.pdf (17/01/2025).

DIVERSE CRISIS EXAMPLES AND GOOD PRACTICES FROM THE PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

⊘ MOBILISATION TO MEET LEGAL THREATS

Central European University (CEU) was founded in 1991 as an American-style graduate university specialising in the humanities and social sciences. Originally with sites in multiple cities, it quickly consolidated in Budapest. In 2017, the Hungarian government proposed and passed the so-called "Lex CEU" of 2017, which threatened the continued provision of the university's degree programmes. Faced with this existential threat, university leadership, informal student and staff networks, alumni and other supporters quickly disseminated information and mobilised support, for example through town hall meetings, letters of support, and outreach to local and foreign governmental agencies. Protests brought an estimated 5,000 to 10,000 people onto the streets and 30,000 signatures to the Hungarian parliament.

When the legislation was signed, university leadership continued outreach to the government, while pursuing opportunities for redress (e.g. to the European Court of Justice) and mitigation. Ultimately it had to relocate degree programmes to Vienna, Austria.

Ongoing Crisis	Legal Constraints	Institutional Crisis	National Crisis	Governments	HEIs	Civil Society	Communities of Interest

⊘ ARMED ATTACK ON CAMPUS – COORDINATING WITH EXTERNAL ACTORS

At **Erasmus University Rotterdam Medical Campus** (MC), a tragic shooting occurred: a medical student who experienced mental health issues, after killing two neighbours, fatally shot a lecturer during a class. The incident underscored the immediate need for campus safety measures. Erasmus MC led the response, which involved multiple teams, including the Crisis Management Team and Crisis Team Operational, and also Rotterdam's city "triangle" (mayor, police, public prosecutor). It started with a crisis diagnosis to assess the situation, identified those affected and outlined an action plan. The response followed the OOD method (Observe, Orient, Decide) with thorough documentation. Tailored communication strategies were developed for different stakeholders, managed by a dedicated media team. Separate approaches were implemented for Erasmus MC and the broader university campus, ensuring the unique needs of each site were met. This coordinated strategy ensured effective crisis management and communication across institutional levels.

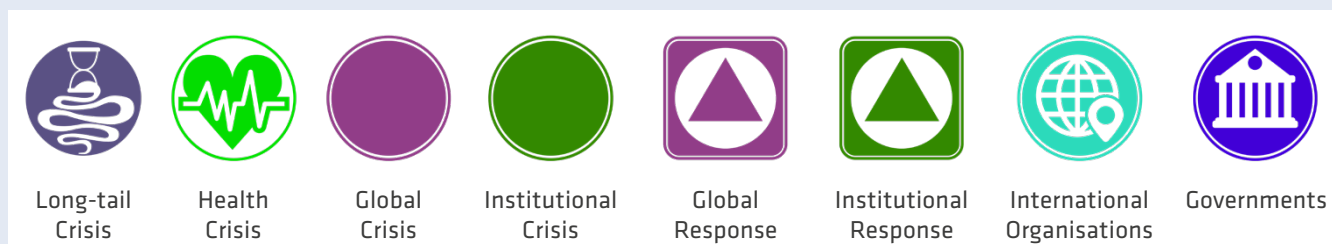| Sudden Crisis	Violence on Campus	Institutional Crisis	Institutional Response	HEIs

⊙ SCALING DOWN/FINANCIAL CRISIS

VID Specialised University (Norway), like many higher education institutions in Norway, has faced a financial crisis driven by fluctuating student enrolment numbers, particularly in key professional education programmes. The withdrawal of additional government funding initiatives made available as Covid-19 relief measures, combined with shifts in political funding priorities at a national level, further destabilised institutions' financial standing. These challenges coincided with VID's ongoing strategic academic development, recent completion of major campus projects, and progress on a final campus project, all of which heightened the impact of the crisis. In response to this "perfect economic storm", VID launched several adaptation projects focused on educational offerings, research and administration, while pro-rectors and deans worked with section leaders to manage redundancies and implement administrative and academic restructuring. The rector and leadership team played a key role in overseeing the situation and ensuring clear communication, while the financial office focused on risk assessment. Efforts to keep internal staff and student stakeholders informed were prioritised and supported by digital updates and formal and informal meetings. Keeping external groups up to date proved more challenging. All efforts were marked by a delicate balance of urgency and caution. Amid this turmoil, VID accelerated initiatives to introduce new PhD, master's and bachelor's programmes, while also engaging in critical discussions about the future of existing programmes and the university's long-term strategic direction.

Slow-Burning Crisis	Financial Crisis	Institutional Crisis	Institutional Response	Departmental Response	Civil Society

⊙ LEARNING FROM THE CRISIS

University San Pablo CEU launched an informal mental health and wellbeing service during the Covid-19 pandemic, with employees from the international office primarily supporting international students. Over time, this grew into a well-established service[12], which assists international students on all kinds of issues, from translating for them for medical issues to including their national dishes in the catering services. It is now also available to and benefits domestic students. Additionally, new university regulations[13] have been issued to ensure adequate support in situations of danger or emergency, or both, for national and international students.

Long-tail Crisis	Health Crisis	Global Crisis	Institutional Crisis	Global Response	Institutional Response	International Organisations	Governments

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12 *University Wellbeing Service*. https://www.uspceu.com/en/students/support-service/sou (accessed 17/01/2025).

13 *Action Plan in situations of Emergency, Life-threatening Emergency or Urgent Attention on USP campuses and abroad to national students.* https://www.uspceu.com/portals/0/docs/transparencia/normativa/normativa-interna/estudiantes/EN%20-%20NUEVO%20Plan%20 actuacion%20emergencia%20ceu.%20ultima%20revision%20(003).pdf (accessed 17/01/2025).

⊙ RISK OF FOREIGN INTERFERENCE

In 2023, **Dalarna University** was required to step up its security measures, in response to requirements from the Swedish government aimed at enhancing security and preventing foreign interference in the university sector.

Dalarna University developed the following measures:

- organisation for security assessment;
- "annual wheel" with measures for systematic security assessment;
- information to employees and installation of lockdown buttons in case of ODV (ongoing deadly violence).

While the promise is that these measures should help the university to maintain and enhance security and prevent foreign interference, the approach by the Swedish government was considered to have had a negative impact on the autonomy of the institutions. As part of the measures, the government had changed the composition of university boards, making the participation of a member with security policy expertise compulsory and shortening the duration of office of board members (from 36 to 17 months).
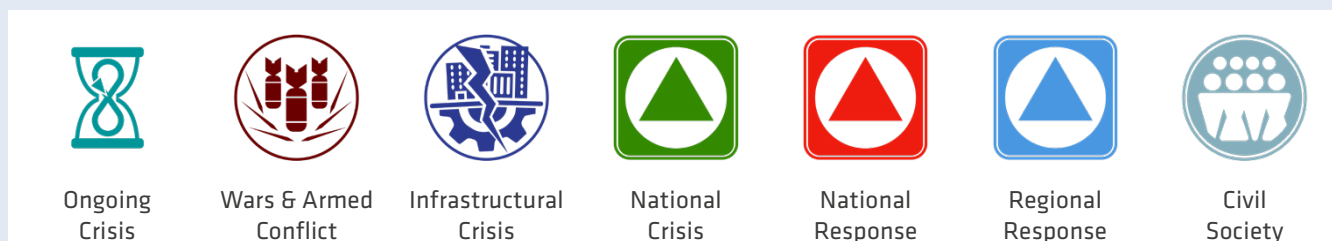
Ongoing Crisis	Cyber Security Risks	National Crisis	National Response	Governments	HEIs
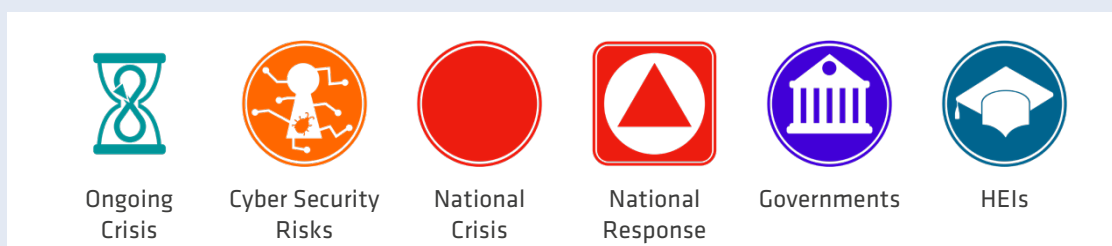
⊙ THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS IN OVERCOMING WARTIME CHALLENGES

Simon Kuznets Kharkiv National University of Economics (Ukraine) was deeply affected by 24 February 2022, a day that marked a turning point for all Ukrainians, as the reality of war suddenly overwhelmed their lives. From the first hours of the invasion, Kharkiv – a city just 40 kilometres from the Russian border – came under relentless bombardment. Faculty, students and university staff faced various hardships: displacement within Ukraine or abroad, living under occupation, losing their homes, being injured or joining the Ukrainian armed forces.

The university's infrastructure was also unprepared for such a crisis. Equipment was scattered across several locations, and not all databases had backups. As the war started just a week before the start of the semester, the learning materials on the Learning Management System were not fully updated. Support came quickly from local IT companies with whom the university had a long-standing relationship. The partners funded the migration of all databases of the university, including courses on the Learning Management System, to Amazon cloud storage. They also provided Starlink systems to ensure uninterrupted internet access.

This partnership enabled the university to resume full online learning just two weeks after the war began. As well as ensuring the continuity of education, this effort was critical to maintaining the psychological wellbeing of both faculty and students during an extraordinarily challenging time.

Ongoing Crisis	Wars & Armed Conflict	Infrastructural Crisis	National Crisis	National Response	Regional Response	Civil Society

⊙ CASCADING CRISIS

Shortly after the pandemic, **Yeditepe University** had to transition to remote learning in response to the devastating 2023 twin earthquakes affecting 11 Turkish cities, and swiftly established a crisis desk led by the rector. Within 24 hours, the university's Natural Disasters Search and Rescue Club (YUDAK) and medical teams deployed to the earthquake zone, while approximately 600 students and staff coordinated campus-based aid collection efforts. The institution implemented comprehensive support measures, including a dedicated support line for students and alumni, and launched various aid campaigns communicated through official channels. The alumni association initiated a technology donation drive for affected students.

The university's learning and teaching centre, YU-LEARNT, remained active throughout the period, developing educational materials, including videos and documents, focusing on psychological trauma, [14] effective communication with children,[15] and maintaining mental wellbeing[16] during crisis situations. These materials were shared within the university through in-person and online meetings, and with the wider public via social media channels and the website.

Sudden Crisis	Natural Calamities	Regional Crisis	Institutional Crisis	National Response	Institutional Response	Governments	HEIs

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14 https://yulearnt.yeditepe.edu.tr/en/post-earthquake-debriefing-1-what-are-we-going-through (accessed 17/01/2025).

15 https://yulearnt.yeditepe.edu.tr/en/post-earthquake-debriefing-2-child-and-adult-communication (accessed 17/01/2025).

16 https://yulearnt.yeditepe.edu.tr/en/post-earthquake-debriefing-3-mental-well-being-children-and-adolescents (17/01/2025).

Recommendations and considerations on learning and teaching:
never waste a good crisis

Universities need to build up crisis response capacity. The Covid-19 pandemic exemplified how unprepared institutions struggled to maintain operations, including learning and teaching provision. This was followed by Russia's war against Ukraine, and the consequences it brought to Ukraine's higher education institutions and their members. Through acts of support, and enhanced collaboration, it indirectly involved many institutions outside of Ukraine. In addition, natural disasters, technological and financial crises, government interference, social upheavals, polycrises and subsequent global challenges tend to profoundly disrupt the fundamental operations of higher education institutions, exposing their vulnerabilities and testing their adaptive capacities.

This report recommends the following actions:

- **Maintaining the continuity of learning and teaching**

Even under challenging circumstances, ensuring the continuity of learning and teaching during a crisis is vital, not only for students and staff but also for wider society. Institutions should establish structures to support both staff and students, including robust online teaching infrastructure and mental health support. After a crisis, workloads should be reassessed to prevent burnout and ensure sustainable post-crisis recovery.

- **Crisis response planning**

As illustrated by the matrix of levels and types of crises, more often than not, even if the crises are experienced at the institutional level, the solutions require orchestrated efforts by multiple stakeholders. The report recommends that institutions develop a crisis response plan or strategy that helps to ensure swift, flexible crisis response and management, including the continuation of learning and teaching. Such a plan should provide some suggestions, but does not deliver a blueprint, for obvious reasons. Given the diversity of crises and of the conditions under which they are experienced, there are no one-size-fits-all solutions. However, leadership's agility in taking actions can be linked to the preparedness level of the institutions.

- **Contingency plans and resource allocation**

Comprehensive contingency plans should account for sudden increases in student numbers and allocate adequate resources to address these challenges. Financial reserves and the necessary infrastructure should be in place to ensure a rapid and effective response during crises, helping institutions to maintain educational continuity and support staff and students.

- **Foresight and vigilance**

Recognising when a situation has evolved into a crisis is not always straightforward. However, delaying a response can come at a high cost. As illustrated by the example of the crack in the pillar, institutional leadership should be proactive in identifying emerging problems, both internal and external to the

university. This requires a strong sense of awareness for "risk drivers": Leadership needs to actively acknowledge factors that could lead to crises, and also encourage students and staff to raise concerns about issues that may require attention.

◆ Building resilience through reflection and knowledge

The preparation of such a crisis management plan might appear to be an investment in an event that might never happen. But the group concluded that this might pay off in any case, as it can strengthen operational capacity and academic values, and contribute to enhancing the institution and its learning and teaching mission and provision – not only for crises, but also for the non-crisis times. As the adage goes, "never waste a good crisis". Institutions should view crises as opportunities for learning and long-term resilience building. Continuous reflection on past crises enables institutions to improve their crisis preparedness and adapt their strategies to meet the diverse needs of domestic and international students, strengthening their capacity to face future challenges. By preparing for a variety of potential crises, institutions can transform vulnerabilities into opportunities for institutional growth, resilience and strategic development.

◆ Effective communication

Clear, transparent and consistent communication is critical during crises. Institutions should have communication plans in place to provide regular updates and keep all stakeholders informed. Senior leaders, under significant pressure during crises, must also be supported administratively and emotionally to manage these challenges.

◆ Collaboration and institutional support

Crisis response requires collaboration both within the institution and with external stakeholders. Institutions should prepare for potential surges in student numbers due to crises and establish contingency plans and collaborative networks. In addition, the role of the learning and teaching centre is key in ensuring that education continues with minimal disruption, alongside maintaining social interaction for the wellbeing of students and staff.

It is also recommended that institutions have at least a small permanent team of academic and administrative staff working on various possible crisis scenarios and assessing the possible prioritised actions, budget allocation, communication channels, groups or departments to be mobilised, and regular system checks, among other things. The mental health and wellbeing of staff and students must always be seen as a priority in crisis situations.

Lastly, the group recommends always involving the institution's learning and teaching centre, or a similar team, both in the development of a crisis plan or strategy and during an actual crisis. These centres typically have well-established networks across the institution and are knowledgeable about the possibilities and limitations in mitigating the impact of a crisis on education.

Annex

EUA LEARNING & TEACHING THEMATIC PEER GROUPS

As part of its work on learning and teaching, EUA carries out activities with the aim of engaging with university communities in charge of learning and teaching. One of these activities is coordinating the work of a set of Thematic Peer Groups. The groups consist of universities selected through a call for participation to:

- discuss and explore practices and lessons learnt in organising and implementing learning and teaching in European universities;
- contribute to the enhancement of learning and teaching by identifying key considerations or recommendations on the selected theme.

The 2024 Thematic Peer Groups, active from March 2024 to February 2025, invited participating universities to undertake peer learning and exchange of experience, while at the same time they contributed to EUA's policy work as the voice of European universities in policy debates, such as the Bologna Process.

Each group was chaired by one university and supported by a coordinator from the EUA secretariat. Each group had three base meetings, either online or at a member university, to discuss 1) key challenges related to the theme, 2) how to address the challenges through innovative practices and approaches, and 3) what institutional policies and processes support the enhancement in learning and teaching. Outside the three meetings, the groups were free to meet online for shorter meetings or organise their work independently. Members of the groups also attended a final workshop, where they had the opportunity to meet and discuss the outcomes of other groups and address synergies. The workshop was hosted by University College Cork in Ireland on 26 February 2025 and was followed by the 2025 European Learning & Teaching Forum on 27–28 February, where focus groups based on the work of the Thematic Peer Groups were organised to obtain feedback on their results.

Composition of the Thematic Peer Group " Learning and teaching in situations of crisis: needs and support provision"

(starting with the group chair and by alphabetical order of the country name):

- **Yeditepe University, Türkiye**
    - Berrin Yanıkkaya, Director of the Learning and Teaching Implementation and Research Centre, YU-LEARNT, and Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (Chair)
    - Mehmet Korman, YU-LEARNT member and PhD student
    - Denizalp Şimşek, YU-LEARNT member and PhD student
    - Toprak Cem Savaş, YU-LEARNT member and undergraduate student

- **Central European University, Austria**
  - Michael Kozakowski, Director, Yehuda Elkana Center for Teaching, Learning, and Higher Education Research
  - Mátyás Szabó, Senior Program Manager, Yehuda Elkana Center for Teaching, Learning, and Higher Education Research

- **Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands**
  - Mirjam van de Woerdt, Manager of the Community for Learning & Innovation
  - Vera Breijer, student at the Community for Learning & Innovation
  - Iris Mohringer, student at the Community for Learning & Innovation

- **VID Specialised University, Norway**
  - Ellen Marie Sæthre-McGuirk, Vice-Rector of Education
  - Malin Hellem, student leader of the Learning Environment Committee (2023/24)

- **Universidad San Pablo CEU, Spain**
  - Ainhoa Uribe Otalora, Vice-Rector for Internationalisation and Professor of Political Science and Public Management
  - Beatriz Jiménez Luengo, Director of the International Strategic Projects Office, Vice-rectorate for Internationalisation

- **Dalarna University, Sweden**
  - Jonas Tosteby, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education
  - Johanna Strickert, Chairperson of Dalarna Student Union

- **Simon Kuznets Kharkiv National University of Economics, Ukraine**
  - Iryna Zolotaryova, Professor, Rector`s adviser in international activities
  - Karina Nemashkalo, Vice-Rector

- **Group coordinators:**
  - Michael Gaebel, Director, Higher Education Policy
  - Gohar Hovhannisyan, Project & Policy Officer, Higher Education Policy

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The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 49 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact their activities.

The Association provides unique expertise in higher education and research as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and good practice among universities. The results of EUA's work are made available to members and stakeholders through conferences, seminars, websites and publications.