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# EFFECT OF THE COVID-19 ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND RECOGNITION INFORMATIVE NOTE FOR HEIs



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## Introduction

This document is intended to:

- present a helicopter overview of the effect the COVID-19 virus epidemic is having in the sphere of international higher education;
- offer a list of resources and information useful for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and credential evaluators;
- offer a particular focus on the developments in Italy regarding the impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education;
- sketch possible impact on recognition, both in the short term and the medium term.

### 1. Overview of information and resources available at international level

To have the up-to-date situation in terms of total numbers, including new cases of COVID-19 infections, the main reference is the World Health Organisation (<https://www.who.int/>).

One of the first measures taken by the majority of national governments, in order to avoid the spread of the pandemic, was the closure of the entire education system for in-presence activities, from kindergarten through to tertiary education. A shift to online and distance learning has been registered globally, but the solutions vary dramatically from country to country and, indeed, often within the same nation.

[UNESCO](#), and its [offices](#), are in the forefront of efforts to coordinate data collection at a global level, including updates on the effects of COVID-19 worldwide, the closure of education institutions and the number of students affected by them. UNESCO is monitoring the situation by establishing several measures such as <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/webinars> to address the crisis, offering information on the [online platforms available](#), aimed at facilitating distance learning, as well as national reports on school closure and updating the interactive map with the latest data.

The Council of Europe set up a specific webpage dedicated to the [COVID-19 response](#). The website covers a number of topics of interest for recognition, covering the possibility for individuals to have [qualifications recognised](#) even in the case of this public health crisis, and offering an overview of continuity of information provision and services in the field of recognition offered by [ENIC-NARIC centres](#). A section of this webpage is dedicated to the role that [refugee health workers can play into the fight against COVID-19](#), and to the “[European Qualifications Passport for Refugees](#)” project, coordinated by Council of Europe.

The European Commission and its different offices are offering as well information, tools and resources on the impact of COVID-19 on education. The Commission and Eurydice are offering a comprehensive and very relevant overview of [European countries education systems response to COVID-19](#), ranging from primary schools to tertiary education.

## 2. Schools closure and final upper secondary school leaving qualification at international level

The entire education sector is struggling to conduct business as usual. Of particular relevance to the higher education sphere are the distinct national measures taken with regards to the upper secondary final leaving certificate, fundamental in the passage from secondary to tertiary education. ENIC-NARIC centres are monitoring the situation, so it is possible to refer to the national ENIC-NARIC centre or to the ENIC-NARIC centre of the country of interest.

Regarding Europe, responses to suspend lessons vary from country to country: some countries have declared the closure of schools “until further notice” while others have fixed a date for the reprise of lessons later in April, May or June (kindly consult the Eurydice “[European countries education systems response to COVID-19](#)”).

As far as the examinations of the final year of secondary school are concerned, the decisions are diverse. Some countries have cancelled them entirely (e.g. [France](#)) and will rely on grade averages for study over the past year, others (Italy) approved a decree law which foresees two possible scenarios for taking these exams, depending on whether the schools reopen or not.

Looking outside Europe, other countries, that depend on external Boards for their examination structure (WAEC - Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, Liberia and Sierra Leone, and various State Examination Boards in India), have postponed their examinations indefinitely. In the meantime, no concrete decisions are being taken on whether or not to issue final school leaving certificates. China has postponed the *Gaokao* exam until July 7, 2020. In the USA, the College Board has shifted Advanced Placement (AP) exams online. Below there is an overview of International examination boards.

In the USA, the [College Board](#), which administers the SAT, has cancelled the May 2<sup>nd</sup> test as well as the makeup test for earlier cancellations in March. Students who registered for the test will receive refunds. The College Board has also [announced plans](#) to allow students to take Advanced Placement (AP) tests from home.

[Cambridge Assessment International Education](#) are publishing updates on an almost daily basis, and the situation it is evolving. Examinations in June 2020 have been cancelled around the world, but students will receive a qualification based on grading by their schools in tandem with outside Cambridge assistance.

No [Pearson](#) exams in May and June will run in any country around the world. This decision applies to all students studying for a range of qualifications including, among others: International GCSEs, International AS and A levels, GCE AS and A levels, both in the UK and internationally.

The [International Baccalaureate](#) DP and CP examinations scheduled between 30<sup>th</sup> April and 22<sup>nd</sup> May will no longer be held. The student will be awarded either the Diploma, Career-related Programme certificate or a course certificate which reflects their standard of work. The achievement will be based on the students’ coursework and the established assessment expertise, rigour and quality control already built into the programmes.



China has postponed the [Gaokao](#) exam until July 7, 2020.

India's external [examination boards](#) have postponed all exams until further notice.

[WAEC](#) – the West Africa Examinations Council (covering Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone) has postponed all exams indefinitely.

### 3. ENIC-NARIC centres and credential evaluation organisations

Almost all the ENIC-NARIC centre are guaranteeing continuity of services and information for institutions and citizens, as reported in the [Council of Europe survey](#). For information it is possible to refer to the [ENIC-NARIC networks](#) website.

The international credential evaluation community has also been in the forefront of implementing specific good practices. Education Credential Evaluators (ECE) has posted its entire library of e-Learning [videos and webinars free online](#). AACRAO has developed a rich section on the [COVID-19 emergency](#) on its website. [TAICEP](#) (The Association for International Credential Evaluators Professionals) is offering webinars "[TAICEP at your desk](#)" dealing also with the COVID-19 response. One of this webinar was conducted by CIMEA and deals with the impact of the COVID-19 virus on higher education and recognition from a European perspective (recording and handout available on the TAICEP website).

CIMEA has offered the use of its [Diplome](#) platform based on blockchain free of charge to all stakeholders within the higher education community during the COVID-19 emergency.

### 4. The Italian case

It is important to underline at the very beginning that in many cases the term "closure" of schools and of Higher Education Institutions refers only to the fact that the buildings are not accessible to activities in presence. This is for instance the case of Italy, where the teaching and learning activities are on-going, academic and administrative staff are working and guaranteeing the continuity of services and students and pupils are attending lessons online and studying at home.

The Italian government has adopted progressive measures leading, on March 4<sup>th</sup> 2020, to the resolution of interrupting in-presence didactic in all educational institutions, including higher education, in order to decrease the spread of COVID-19.

Regarding the end of the school year and the final state exam for upper secondary school (the so-called "Maturità") two scenarios have been set by the Ministry of Education and regulated by the decree "[Decreto-Legge 8 aprile 2020](#)", n. 22:

Here there are the main points of the above mentioned decree translated in English:

**1<sup>st</sup> scenario:** In case schools are allowed to reopen by next May 18<sup>th</sup>:

- a) by waiving the admission requirements for the next class in secondary schools, it will be possible to provide pupils of intermediate grades with remedial classes during the following school year starting from 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020;
- b) the final state exam at the end of lower secondary education will be reviewed, also providing for the elimination of one or more of the written exams or oral interviews;
- c) as to the final state exam at the end of upper secondary education, the composition of the examination board will be reviewed. It will be made up of class teachers plus an external President. The first written exam (Italian language) will continue to come from the Ministry while the second written exam, normally coming from the Ministry, will be developed by individual examination boards. An oral exam covering all the subjects of the curriculum for which the examiners in the board are competent will be maintained.

**2<sup>nd</sup> scenario:** in case schools are not allowed to reopen:

- a) the final state exam at the end of lower secondary education will be replaced with individual students' project works that will be assessed by class teachers;
- b) as to the final state exam at the end of upper secondary education, in addition to the change of the composition of examination boards, there will be no written examinations but just one oral examination covering all the subjects of the curriculum for which the examiners in the board are competent.

The Ministry of Education's indications on the [composition of the examination board](#) for the final state exam at the end of upper secondary education was published on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

In the meantime, the Italian Ministry of Education has put in place several specific measures to deal with the COVID-19 emergency. All the measures and initiatives are described in the [specific section of the Ministry of education and Ministry of University and Research website](#) dedicated to the coronavirus, where there are different sections dedicated to Online open sources, FAQs, legislative acts, useful links.

University exams and final dissertations have been coordinated online since 4<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, while the final exams for the conclusion of the academic year 2018/2019, usually held within the spring session of the following year, have been postponed until 15<sup>th</sup> of June 2020 (Decreto-Legge 17 marzo 2020, n. 18, art. 101) All higher education institutions have established appropriate modalities in order to assure the regular deployment of exams and final degrees, according to their statutes, and within the substantial autonomy granted by law to their activities.

As far as Erasmus+ mobility is concerned, Italian institutions are following up with their students according to the specific guidelines issued by the relevant national agency ([INDIRE](#)). These are updated weekly following the publication of new regulations by the European Commission.

The urgent need for doctors, nurses and paramedical staff in Italian hospitals has led to a temporary change in the recognition of professional qualifications in this particular regulated sector. Medical staff with the professional licence to practise in the countries of origin can apply for professional recognition of licences obtained abroad to Regions. As already said, this is a temporary and exceptional procedure related to the COVID-19 spread (article 13 of the [Decree Law of March 17,](#)



[202 nr. 18](#)). At the same time, the master level degree in “Medicina e chirurgia”, degree class LM/41, gives now the professional right to practise (article 102 of the Decree Law of March 17, 202 nr. 18).

Regarding the need for medical staff, the Council of Europe together with UNCHR, made a joint statement on supporting member states in [bringing refugee health workers into the fight against COVID-19](#). The Council of Europe is also coordinating the [European Qualification Passport for Refugees](#) project, supported by the Italian Ministry of University and Research and with the participation of CIMEA as the Italian NARIC centre.

CIMEA found itself well placed to continue operations with minimum disruption after the lock-down in Italy. The launch of the [Diplome](#) platform in May 2019 meant that its credential evaluation services had already shifted exclusively online. The transfer to smart working occurred seamlessly, and the entire staff is currently working from home. The overall volume of work has reduced, as presumably is the case across the board, but should the demand pick up there would be no problem in guaranteeing business as usual.

Diplome is an ecosystem in which different players can upload and share their qualifications. Diplome is a person-centred application: individual holders of an academic qualification, but also of skills and qualifications linked to professions, can request for their qualifications to be uploaded (by a certification agency, HEI, authorised body, employer etc.) into their digital "wallet" using blockchain technology, creating a decentralised, transparent, certified and unalterable system for academic qualification management, with the aim of facilitating and making every transaction through the digital exchange of academic qualifications more secure and simplifying administrative procedures regarding the evaluation and recognition of qualifications. The institutions that issue qualifications, primarily the institutions of higher education, can also enter the system and use the blockchain platform for the entire life cycle of the student, from the evaluation of the qualifications for enrolment, to the register of individual exams and their grades, until the final qualification is awarded. The qualification uploaded on blockchain from a certified source can then be shared with other institutions or with the employer, thereby allowing the verification of the authenticity of the document in a simple and safe way. By the same token, certification bodies are part of the platform, for example the ENIC-NARIC centres and, more generally, the players that deal with evaluating qualifications. These bodies may provide information relating to transparency, authenticity, legibility and comparability of qualifications internationally directly on Blockchain, minimising the risk of fraud. The holder of the qualification remains in all cases the sole owner of the information and of the cryptographic key that allows access to the data saved on Blockchain, in full compliance with the principles expressed by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The blockchain platform therefore permits an increase in trust in the veracity of the documents, thanks to the immutability of the data loaded on blockchain, to combat the phenomenon of counterfeiting of qualifications, and can be applied to specific sectors such as the recognition of refugee qualifications, the free movement of professionals via professional recognition procedures, and the verification of personal skills.

In the context of the COVID-19 emergency, and in light of the extreme difficulties certain offices are facing (including closure and suspension of all services until further notice), CIMEA would like to

contribute by offering the use of the Diplome platform free of charge for the foreseeable future, thereby promoting the shift to online operations and remote working to whomsoever might benefit.

## 5. Challenges for recognition

What will change for higher education and personal mobility after the Coronavirus? What will the impact on the internationalisation of higher education be? The crisis linked to the spread of the coronavirus forces us to invent a new balance between *Immunitas* and *Communitas*<sup>1</sup>, between public health and the community. The university, by definition, is a community: of students and teachers, of disciplines and of knowledge, a community that is rooted in one place but that lives on relationships, exchanges and mobility at a national and international level. How will this *communitas* be redefined by the need for *immunitas*? Online lessons, classes with a limited number of students, internationalisation at home... are just some of the possible consequences.

On the basis of the current situation we can draw certain outlines for the future.

**Digitilisation** is undoubtedly a central element in managing the emergency, and the crisis will probably act as an accelerator for some processes. In fact, if online teaching has allowed millions of students in Italy and worldwide to continue their studies, graduate and continue to do research, the same is also true in the field of mobility and the recognition of qualifications. According to an [analysis carried out by the Council of Europe](#), through the questionnaire answered by 42 ENIC-NARIC centres, the recognition of qualifications is considered a public service and as such all possible measures have been taken to ensure its continuity for citizens. This continuity was guaranteed with less complexity in the countries where smart working became possible, and where the process of managing recognition requests was already fully or at least partially digitalised. This is the case of the Italian ENIC-NARIC centre, which thanks to the fully computerised procedure for the management of the release of statements of comparability - Diplome - and to the full functionality of its information request bureau for the public and the institutions which is also completely online, was able to continue its activities without interruption of service to citizens.

Furthermore, according to the report of the Council of Europe, there are some complexities in the case of the countries where, in line with current legislation, the certificates must be issued in paper format, with original signatures, both for the creation of such certificates in teleworking mode and for delivery to the interested party.

Delays in evaluation procedures may be due, on the one hand, to difficulty in accessing the paper archives of the ENIC-NARIC centres, or, on the other hand, to the fact that the institutions that issued the certificates or the competent verification authorities may also be closed and have difficulty in responding to requests for information from the centres.

A further element highlighted by the report of the Council of Europe is the drop in requests for recognition, which is, however, offset by greater dynamism in the field of professional recognition, in particular in the medical professions. Yet again, in this case, Italy is in line with the evidence reported by the Council of Europe, having adopted ad hoc rules for the recognition of qualifications obtained abroad in the health professions with the so-called "Cura Italia" decree, shifting the

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<sup>1</sup> Bonomi A., [L'importanza di essere comunità di cura](#), Sole24ore, 10 marzo 2020 [accessed on 20/04/2020].

recognition responsibility from national level to autonomous regions and provinces. The same decree also mandated that the master's degree in medicine and surgery - LM / 41 allowed direct qualification to practise as a doctor (article 13 and 102 of the Decree Law of March 17, 2020 nr. 18). In this sense, many countries have also created channels reserved for refugees who have qualifications and skills in the health sector, in order to cope with the increased demand for staff in this field due to the emergency.

A second area concerns **mobility**: how will it be affected by the current crisis? Will everything return to the pre-crisis status quo, or will we see changes (for example more regional and less global mobility)? Will there be a return to a significant degree of physical mobility, considered irreplaceable by online activity, or instead will the push to the use of digital solutions lead us towards a globalised and virtual mobility, with an increase of students enrolling in universities from other parts of the world without the need to move from their homes? Do we will have more “internationalisation at home”?

Related to the previous point, if we will face a scenario with less physical mobility, can we expect also an increase of **transnational education**-related phenomena? Will higher education institutions be forced to open offices in different regions at least to guarantee some basic services to students that it is not possible to offer online? Will we see a growth in transnational education as an adaption strategy of HEIs?

Another group of issues concerns final **qualifications**: many countries are currently carrying out online teaching activities both at the school and higher education levels, including examinations, graduation thesis defence sessions, and in the near future final higher secondary school leaving examinations. Will anything change in the knowledge, skills and competences inherent in the final title? How will training, and therefore also the **learning outcomes**, change in areas where greater practical activity is required (e.g. professional degrees, VET training, etc.). In fact, will there be a scenario that the current situation leads to, also in the field of higher education, of an increase in short training courses, highly oriented to the job market (e.g. the so-called microcredentials)? It is possible that on the one hand there is a percentage of the population that will have to reconvert after the crisis, either because the crisis led to the cancellation of their previous employment contract, or because digitalisation has made competencies less strategic, or because the post-COVID-19 job market introduces new areas of activity. What form will these new "training offers" take? Will they be online, short, tightly linked to digital innovation and oriented to the job market? Can we expect a rise in “non-traditional” forms and learning and of qualifications (MOOCs, etc)?<sup>2</sup>

Regarding recognition of qualifications, another challenge could be the **delays in verification procedures**, due the closure of Higher education Institutions, difficulties in accessing paper archives for older qualifications, etc.

Looking at the less positive side of the possible changes and challenges that the current situation presents us with, will the crisis lead to a search for "shortcuts" during positioning in the labour market, and will it confront us with an increase of cases of **diploma mills** and **fake and fraudulent**

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<sup>2</sup> A related article is the IEEP-UNESCO “[SDG 4 - Policies for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education](#)”, UNESCO 2020.

**qualifications?** Will the use of "dishonest" behaviour be one of the strategies to face the crisis? If this scenario were to materialise, it would be yet another alert for secure and certified qualification exchange mechanisms.

Another element, less pertinent to the context of mobility and recognition but which must at least be mentioned, is the possible increase in educational **inequality**. Will the digital push be a social leveller, or will it create more social disparity? Will access to technology (also from the hardware point of view of digital devices, computers, etc.), as well as the online study mode, leave someone excluded? Could the aspect of the economic crisis generated by the pandemic also signify a lower participation in higher education, with the attendant cuts and reductions of education costs as non-essential expense?

Another aspect is the **protection of personal data**. In an era of digitalisation, the protection of privacy and the processing and ownership of data represent fundamental issues, also in the educational field. Privacy, data protection, ethics, cheating and other fraudulent activity, cybersecurity and intellectual property management and enforcement will be a challenge.

## 6. Recommendations

It is possible to outline some recommendations for admission officers:

- Digitalisation is a key factor: rely on digital resources, use online verification and databases whenever possible, accept digital qualifications, offer as much as possible information online.
- Be flexible: it is possible that due to the emergency situation some standard procedures in recognition are not possible. It is recommended to be flexible in determining and assessing access requirements and selection criteria for candidates with foreign qualifications and should take into consideration the differences in national systems of education and different national responses to COVID-19. Higher education institutions should not impose requirements that are difficult or impossible to fulfil in the emergency situation.
- Some changes could impact the standard quality assurance and accreditation procedures (see the section dedicated to [COVID-19 consequences](#) on the EQAR website). In case of doubt regarding the status of an institution, it is possible to refer to the national quality assurance agency.
- Create/update country profile database, including:
  - General information on school closure
  - Information on grade assessment and exams
  - Links to legislative acts and open online sources
- Share information with colleagues
- Attend webinar/online training
- Take the chance to study/research on specific HE system/qualifications.



## List of useful links

### **Italy**

<https://www.istruzione.it/coronavirus/index.html> Ministry of Education and Ministry of University and Research COVID-19 guidelines (in Italian)

<http://www.erasmusplus.it/coronavirus-indicazioni-per-i-partecipanti-alle-mobilita-erasmus-e-corpo-europeo-di-solidarieta/> INDIRE website FAQs on Coronavirus effects on Erasmus+ mobility (in Italian)

<https://www.istruzione.it/coronavirus/norme.html> Italian Ministry of Education list of Legislative Decrees referring to COVID-19 (in Italian)

### **Europe**

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/recognition-of-qualifications-in-this-time-of-coronavirus> Council of Europe views on implementation of Lisbon Convention during emergency

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/further-update-on-2020-exams> UK Government position on 2020 exams

<https://pearsonpte.com/articles/covid-19-information-for-pte-academic-test-takers-and-institutions/> Pearson on COVID-19 effect on exams

<https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/cmp/novel-coronavirus-2019/> Effects on Cambridge English Assessment exams

[http://www.ets.org/s/cv/toefl/institutions/update/?WT.ac=TOEFL\\_ChinaUpdate\\_200403](http://www.ets.org/s/cv/toefl/institutions/update/?WT.ac=TOEFL_ChinaUpdate_200403) TOEFL and COVID-19

<https://www.eaie.org/our-resources/library/publication/Research-and-trends/Coping-with-COVID-19--International-higher-education-in-Europe.html> EAIE report on effects of COVID-19 on HE in Europe

<https://www.eaie.org/blog/how-higher-education-institutions-respond-covid-19.html> EAIE checklist for HEIs in Europe

<https://www.eaie.org/blog/supporting-students-coronavirus.html> EAIE take on social and psychological effects

### **Global**

<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/nationalresponses> UNESCO - National Learning Platforms



[https://globaled.gse.harvard.edu/files/geii/files/framework\\_guide\\_v2.pdf](https://globaled.gse.harvard.edu/files/geii/files/framework_guide_v2.pdf) OECD/Harvard Graduate School: guidelines for education response

<https://www.qs.com/qs-industry-reports/> Quacquarelli Symonds free reports

<https://apcoronavirusupdates.collegeboard.org/educators> Reactions from US College Board relating to APs