

## Questioning the Austrian Universities' Distance Learning Landscape during the COVID-19 crisis

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### ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic quickly escalated into a global health emergency with substantial implications for the higher education sector. The COVID-19 situation at Austrian universities has led to significant challenges for the higher education community. Starting from spring 2020, COVID-19 caused universities to close the campuses and forced them to adopt online mode immediately with manifold implications: (1) lockdown time has significantly disrupted the usual information and communication ways previously used between colleagues, working groups, lecturers and students as well as between students; (2) to appropriately communicate with students and to meet their needs, instructors had to adapt new didactical concepts and had to deal with new web conference-, learning platform- and online examination-tools; (3) university staff had to manage some kind of uncertainty, especially related to information lacks due to the communication policy of responsible university rectors based on given and mainly politically-driven changing overall conditions. - Academic staff of 18 universities has been surveyed to find their perspectives about online education and surrounding aspects. Collected contemporary data was exposed to descriptive and inductive statistical analysis using appropriate econometrical techniques, reflecting respondents' experiences concerning distance learning (adjustment and implementation) as well as surrounding issues like reasons for working restrictions and home office aspects, technically-related restrictions, issues of workers' protection, data protection, and certain additional aspects. As an example, a lack of face-to-face interaction with students and inadequate infrastructure and tools were, among some other issues, highlighted by the respondents.

**Keywords:** pandemic crisis; e-learning; higher education; home office; online survey