

We Can Never Go Back

Exploring the (dis)advantages of distance learning modes
for disabled students

A Discussion Paper Brought to You by the LINK Network



Contents

CONTENTS	2
ABOUT THE LINK NETWORK	3
A NOTE ON LANGUAGE	3
ABSTRACT	3
INTRODUCTION	4
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES	6
LEARNING FROM POSITIVE EXPERIENCES	8
NO GOING BACK?	13
AND YET...WE'RE GOING BACK. BUT WHY?	14
CONCLUSION - LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIENCE	15
BIBLIOGRAPHY:	18
APPENDIX - CURRENT POLICIES, PRACTICES AND INITIATIVES IN PARTNER COUNTRIES RELEVANT TO THIS PAPER	20
<i>Ireland</i>	20
<i>Norway</i>	21
<i>Slovenia</i>	21
<i>Sweden</i>	22
<i>The Netherlands</i>	22
<i>The UK</i>	22

Estimated Reading Time: 25-30 mins

About the LINK Network

The LINK Network is a European learning network made up of 7 organisations and educational institutions with national remits on issues related to disability and inclusive education, focussing on access to and full participation in further and higher education. The aim of the LINK Network is to promote the full inclusion of disabled students in further and higher education, with the core objective to share knowledge and best practice in the development of inclusive teaching and learning environments and practice, across further and higher education. This allows all partner organisations to share international empirical evidence and together, develop an overarching evidence base on creating more equitable learning environments for disabled students in Europe.

The current LINK partners are: AHEAD (Ireland), DŠIS (Slovenia), ECIO (The Netherlands), NADP (United Kingdom), Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (Norway), Stockholm University (Sweden), SIHO (Belgium).

A Note on Language

In this paper, the terms “persons with disabilities” and “disabled people” are used interchangeably. The LINK network recognises that different terminology is prevalent and culturally dominant in different European regions and respects the right of individuals and communities to self-determine.

The term ‘disabled people’ is recognised by many within the disability rights movement in Europe to align with the social and human rights model of disability, as it is considered to impute that people with an impairment are disabled by barriers in the environment and society. However, we also recognise that others prefer the term “persons with disabilities” to impute that they are first and foremost human beings entitled to human rights. This reflects the language used in the UNCRPD. Finally, we recognise that some people do not identify as being disabled.

The interchanging language is intended to be inclusive and respectful of all.

Abstract

This discussion paper explores what lessons can be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic about distance learning, specifically for students with disabilities in higher education institutions. It is based on both the experiences and insights of LINK partner organisations of engaging with national stakeholders, students and staff throughout COVID-19 to date, and on more concrete evidence which emerged from the partner countries during the period.

The paper finds that the experiences of students with disabilities of distance learning through lockdown, and the resulting changes to teaching and learning practices, were

mixed. For many students with disabilities, this change caused huge difficulty and provided additional challenges to their learning. However, others had a very positive experience, and felt that the move to distance learning and more flexible modes of assessment enabled them to manage the impact of their disabilities better and learn more effectively.

Interestingly, certain groups of students found particular aspects of the transition to distance learning as transformative in their learning experience. The partners argue that the hugely mixed experiences, highlight the need to promote flexibility and choice in the mode of learning where possible.

However, the paper notes that despite many European and national objectives in LINK partner countries to develop more distance, blended and fully online programmes, partners report that the return to predominantly in-person learning is evident.

Finally, the paper argues that learning from the lockdown experiences of students with disabilities, by providing greater flexibility and choice in the mode of learning can help us to provide a better experience for all students into the future.

Introduction

In this discussion paper developed by the LINK Network, we explore what lessons can be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic about distance learning, specifically for students with disabilities in higher education institutions. The paper is based both on the experiences and insights of LINK partner organisations of engaging with national stakeholders, students and staff throughout COVID-19 to date, and on more concrete evidence which emerged from the partner countries during the period.

The partnership is aware of varying terminology concerning distance learning and other modes that involve some form of online learning, but for the purposes of this paper, when we refer to the term distance learning, we mean online learning which takes place away from the physical campus.

In some cases, distance learning is offered as the complete mode of a programme, where all students participate in all activities online, away from the physical campus. But distance learning can also be offered as part of a blended or hybrid mode, where some activities take place in person on campus (perhaps lectures or labs for example), and others online (perhaps tutorials, group study sessions or viewing recorded materials for example). Equally, distance learning may be offered as an optional mode in a hy-flex delivery model, where all traditionally in-person learning activities are designed to be engaged with either online or in-person, and students can choose in real-time which mode works best for them on a given day.

In this paper, we focus on the COVID-19 distance learning experiences of students with disabilities. It is not the intention of the partnership in developing this paper to engage in the general debate about the quality of distance learning, rather it is to add value to the international discourse by exploring the pros and cons of distance learning specifically for students with disabilities. By elevating the experiences of this cohort, often not well considered in the wider debate, we believe our collective expertise as a network focussed on the inclusion of this cohort can make an important contribution.

While this paper looks specifically at distance learning through the lens of students with disabilities, we endorse as a network the concept central to universal design thinking that designing to the margins of a user base provides benefits for all users. And so, we believe that in listening to the experiences of students with disabilities and using it to shape future programme delivery, all students will benefit from the changes made.

In preparation for developing this paper, several of the LINK partners met with student institutions and other relevant stakeholders in their countries and asked the following questions: What impact did COVID-19 have on students with disabilities? How did higher education institutions in Europe redesign their programme delivery during and after the period of enforced distance learning during the pandemic? What can we learn from the experiences of students with disabilities during that period? So, while the paper is authored by the network, it is informed by engagement with a range of stakeholders in LINK partner countries, and we thank them for their time and input.

The Appendix of the paper includes resources, practices and initiatives gathered from LINK partner countries as part of preparing this paper. These resources concern the practical implementation of distance learning, supports and resources introduced during COVID-19 to support educators, and research or policy documents relating to the topic.

Prior to COVID-19, in most of the partner jurisdictions only a very small percentage of programmes were delivered in a mode involving distance learning – whether that be fully online, hybrid or hy-flex. Distance learning was culturally seen as something niche, and almost separate to a ‘normal’ higher education experience. In many jurisdictions, distance learning was largely provided by a small number of dedicated distance learning providers.

The mass distance learning provision enforced by COVID-19 lockdowns created an environment across Europe where distance learning became perhaps not ‘normal’, but most definitely ubiquitous. Institutions engaged in huge professional development drives concerning online teaching and assessment practices, and the sector invested significant resources in technological hardware and software infrastructure to support distance learning.

While the rushed move to distance learning meant that many staff found delivery challenging, and the quality and consistency of provision was extremely varied, undoubtedly creative and inclusive teaching practices emerged, and rigid assessment practices long

challenged by disabled students where in some cases rapidly replaced with more flexible alternatives.

The disabled student experiences of this shift to distance learning were extremely varied also, with many finding the isolation and lack of peer support extremely challenging, while others flourished as long-standing barriers to access were rapidly dismantled.

In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic has offered us a unique opportunity to deeply explore the value of distance learning, and build a greater evidence base for its pros and cons. Equally, we must ensure that we evaluate the significant changes to teaching and learning practices that the enforced move to distance learning precipitated. We have a responsibility as educators to use that evidence base to support the appropriate application of distance learning in delivering a more flexible and inclusive experience to a changing higher education population into the future.

And yet as countries have emerged from lockdown, the majority of partners report that the rush 'back to normal' is evident, with most institutions returning to a largely in-person offering. Only a small number of institutions LINK partners have engaged with have stated that they intend to maintain balance in offering distance and in-person learning.

This paper calls on the higher education sector not to 'throw the baby out with the bathwater', but instead to learn from the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning for specific groups of students and use it to build better and more inclusive educational provision for all. In particular, it highlights the need for providing greater choice and flexibility in the mode of learning where appropriate and feasible.

In this paper, you may see examples of student testimony quoted from partner countries. These quotes are largely from a variety of published research reports and blogs/articles in the partner regions.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Students with Disabilities

In the beginning of 2020, COVID-19 spread through Europe and led to strict public health measures and enforced lockdowns in European countries. Higher education institutions were forced overnight to re-organise their programmes in a largely fully online mode. This required an urgent response and rapid adaptation from institutions, teachers and students.

In many cases, live in-person delivery was replaced with asynchronous pre-recorded lectures/tutorials and digital resources, and/or live lectures/tutorials via video conferencing. Often, timed 'closed-book' exams which dominated the assessment landscape prior to COVID-19, were replaced during this period. Typically, in these instances, institutions implemented alternative written or project-based assessments, and more inclusive exam formats such as open-book exams. In open book exams, individuals can refer to their textbooks and have a much longer period in which to complete the exam, both significant flexibilities for disabled students.

The disabled student population appear to be split in what they feel about distance learning and whether it is preferable or not. Most national studies related to online learning during the pandemic showed that in the general population, students evaluate distance learning to be of a lower quality experience than traditional on-campus learning, but most desire elements of the experience of distance learning to be retained, (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2021).

Students with disabilities frequently stated a lack of contact with fellow students and less engaging lectures as the most important challenges. The reduced direct support from both peers and institutional staff was a significant barrier to both wellbeing and learning.

“There is no social contact, which made my problems worse.” - Slovenian Student (DSIS, 2021)

“This has been the worst year of my entire education. I lost an entire semester of labs and classes. It feels as though I’ve retained none of the information given to me and the communication between students and lecturers has been frustrating at best and non-existent at worst.” - Irish Student, (AHEAD, 2021).

“The social contact with teachers and other students is completely gone, and as a consequence it is no longer possible to have discussions about the course content together.” - Swedish Student, (Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2021)

“I hate webinars! Everything is happening at the same time, and it is so distracting that I cannot concentrate.” - UK Student, (NADP, 2020).

On the other hand, many students with disabilities who experienced online learning throughout the pandemic, found it to be a flexible and easier way to take part in the learning process.

“From the environment of my own home, I could better show what I learned and what I am capable of during examinations. My study success has been largely improved in the last two years.” - Dutch Student, (Lont, 2022).

“It takes so much energy to travel that I was exhausted and couldn’t even listen to the lecture let alone take notes (pre-lockdown). Nowadays, at home, I can really listen and understand. I listened from bed yesterday and still felt included.” - UK Student, (NADP, 2020).

“As a student with mobility impairment, I find on-line studies much more practical than at the faculty. I noticed that during lockdown I had a nearly 100% attendance score for my lectures and tutorials. This was never the case when I had to go to the faculty. I can say that I got more out of my studies this year than all the previous years combined. I would be very happy if disabled students could continue attending studies on-line also after things return to ‘normal’.” - Slovenian Student (DSIS, 2021)

“At my dream university, there is a one-week home exam as a form of assessment. Being able to sit the exam when I was fit enough to do so was completely revolutionary.” - Norwegian Student, (Arnesen, 2021).

This mixed experience is reflected in the results of a study in Ireland with more than 700 students with disabilities participating (AHEAD, 2021). One third of students with disabilities considered learning from home to be more accessible for them than on-campus learning, with 52% believing it to be less accessible. In the same study, approximately half of students with disabilities desired distance learning to feature as part of their future provision in a blended (39%) or fully online (9%) mode, with the other half wishing to return to mostly on-campus learning (50%).

In the fall of 2021, two Dutch advocacy organizations for people with disabilities and chronic diseases (Ieder(in) and JongPIT) collaborated with a Dutch advocacy organization for students (LSVb), to conduct a quantitative, survey informed analysis of the experiences of online education for students with disabilities and chronic diseases. Although the cohort was relatively small with 121 Dutch students participating, the findings suggest that students with disabilities desire, and frequently require online education for a wide range of reasons, many of which are health related. 74% of participants stated that distance learning is necessary due to their energy levels and physical strain. Half of the students agreed that the flexibility that distance learning offers is necessary for them to engage with medical appointments. From the perspective of academic progress and equity of learning, 26% of the students reported they can better concentrate during online classes (Ieder(in), JongPIT, LSVb, 2021). The research demonstrates that offering distance learning options is both a matter of health and academic success for students with disabilities in the Netherlands, and that choice in the mode of engagement would be optimal.

The desire for choice is echoed in research from Slovenia, where a survey showed that 80% of students with disabilities would prefer to have a choice between physical or online attendance, as they perceived it to increase the accessibility of education for them. (DSIS, 2022).

The mixed experiences of students with different types of disabilities across partner countries, and the evidence regarding student desires, highlights the need to offer more flexibility and choice regarding the mode of learning where possible.

Learning from Positive Experiences

What is also clear from both the qualitative evidence available and the anecdotal engagement of LINK partners with students, is that certain cohorts of students had a hugely positive experience of very specific aspects of distance learning, and the changes to teaching and assessment practices during the period. It is important that we learn from these valuable insights.

Some advantages frequently cited to LINK partners are included below:

Students with mobility impairments, chronic pain and fatigue often reported having no issues with inaccessible lecture rooms, long hours on campus, and thus experienced less

physical strain and greater energy levels – all of which contributed to significant health benefits that were direct attributes of distance learning.

“Learning from home has worked really well for me in so many ways. Not having to travel to college on the days I feel the worst physically has meant I have missed far less classes than last year. From that perspective online learning has made things so much better for me” - Irish Student, (AHEAD, 2021).

“Online education was an eye-opener for me; it is possible for me to follow classes and still have energy at the end of the day.” - Dutch student (HOP, 2022).

“Last year, when we had lectures on zoom, things were more practical for me. Due to therapies and health reasons, I wasn't staying in the town where my faculty is. It also happened that I had difficulties arranging transportation from my hometown to the faculty. That is why I was really happy to have the opportunity to attend lectures on-line. I really wish we had this option also in the future as I believe more students would attend lectures this way.” - Slovenian Student, (DSIS,2022).

Students with mental health problems, ADHD or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) frequently stated that the reduced pressure to engage socially with peers decreased anxiety. It was often cited that having their own quiet, personal space enabled them to focus more, better follow the class and complete their assignments.

“I think it's difficult to learn when you are sitting in a lecture hall with many others. For me, it has been much easier to concentrate and understand the subject when streaming lectures from home.” - Norwegian Student, (Torgersen, 2021)

“For me hybrid learning would make things much easier. Perhaps also for other students with chronic illness. Dealing with anxiety and situational depression, it is sometimes difficult to go to the local store, let alone to attend lectures. I therefore miss classes, which causes gaps in knowledge and additional stress when I need to catch up.” - Slovenian Student, (DSIS, 2022).

Students with acute or chronic conditions often cited appreciating not missing classes due to remissions or flare ups of their conditions, which they frequently experienced pre-pandemic. They often reported that combining their health related and study routines was much easier, especially where live activities were also recorded and provided for later review.

“As someone who has severe pain almost every day and has to use pain killers that cause reduced concentration, sleepiness and poor memory, the transition to distance learning has been absolutely fantastic” - Norwegian Student, (Arnesen, 2021).

“I save time not having to commute to the faculty. At home, I have an adjustable desk, a special chair and a large computer screen, which I don't have at the faculty, so I work better from home. On Thursdays, I have lectures throughout the whole day with one to two hour gaps in between. When I was at the faculty, this was very tiring because I did not know where to go to rest a bit, now that I work from home, it is much easier. I can simply lie down in my bed.” - Slovenian Student, (DSIS, 2022).

“The amount of extra emotional and physical harm I’ve put myself through forcing myself to get to class (in the past) because I was already behind, and the only person missing out was me. I don’t want anyone else to go through this. I don’t want anyone else to be let down and not have the opportunity to study because of a health issue keeping them from classes. It’s not right.” - Irish Student, (AHEAD, 2021).

Deaf/hard of hearing students frequently reported it was easier for them to follow on-line classes, since they were able to connect their hearing aid directly to the computer’s sound output, which made it easier to understand the lecturer. They frequently cited being able to lip-read more easily due to the close-up camera on the lecturer, and when captions were enabled, appreciated the ability to utilise them.

“Ultimately there are some perks of learning at home especially for hard of hearing, because most of it is through audio-visual lectures which is a good thing because now, I can finally hear the lecturers speaking at a higher volume.” - Irish Student, (AHEAD, 2021).

“I prefer on-line lectures; I find them much more accessible. It is easier to understand what the lecturers are speaking since I can connect my hearing aid directly to (the) computer’s sound output wirelessly. This way I can actually understand the lectures, whereas in person it was much more difficult or even impossible at times.” - Slovenian Student, (DSIS, 2022).

Many disabled students reported their time was more efficiently spent on studying, not on commuting to the faculty.

“I experienced the online classes as pleasant. It saved me travel time and online class is also quieter than a crowded classroom.” - Dutch student, (ECIO, 2020).

“I chose two courses on two different faculties which makes it difficult to organise things. Sometimes lectures are overlapping, or I don’t have enough time to move from one faculty to the other. At other times I have big gaps between lectures (4 to 8 hours). I use public transport to come from a town which is 25 km from where my faculty is. If I go to the faculty twice a day, just the journey takes more than 4 hours which is tiring in itself. If I was able to join these lectures on-line, I would be more productive in my studies.” - Slovenian Student, (DSIS, 2022).

Many students, especially those with memory processing difficulties and specific learning difficulties, reported that the move away from timed in-person exams to other forms of assessment enabled them to achieve better grades, which they felt were more reflective of their true ability.

“Normally I don’t get good grades; my processing is really bad, so I find it hard to think under pressure and I’ve always thought I was just not clever. But now that our exams aren’t timed the same way, I can do exams from home, I can take a breather and come back; it makes such a difference. I got my highest grades ever, so much better than I normally do. Knowing what my mind can actually do when it is allowed to, has changed the way that I relate to myself; I have so much more confidence now I can’t even explain it.” - UK Student. (Low, 2020)

“One thing I’ll miss from having things be online. No memory alone based exams. In 1st year, I failed my psychology exams and scraped passes in my criminology ones. Now in 2nd year, in both of my subjects for my end of term assignments (criminology) and exams (psychology), which was open book but still timed, I’ve been top 5 to 10 of my entire year.” - Irish Student, (AHEAD, 2021)

“Exams have also worked out well for students with certain disabilities, for example concentration problems. Taking exams from home has been great, and felt less stressful.” - Swedish Student, (Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2021).

Despite the mixed experiences and opinions regarding distance learning, recorded lectures for asynchronous viewing was mentioned extensively by members of all cohorts of disabled students in all countries, suggesting that implementing it would have broad support.

“I would love if we could have pre-recorded lectures with in-person Q&As with online options for this. I have found it interesting that when I watch live lectures and then go back to watch them back, I realise I have missed tonnes at the live session. I really appreciated the Q&As and these are the only parts that need to be live.” - Irish Student, (AHEAD, 2021).

“To ensure that students can participate on equal terms, all classes ought to be taught digitally in the future. [...] It is good to have the opportunity to pause lectures and look things up, and not having to be stressed about missing out on information, as you can view it again later.” - Swedish Student, (Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2021).

“Having a lecture recording is the best solution for students with disabilities. Of course, they should be protected so as not to be passed on to other people. This enables us, regardless of our physical, emotional, mental or other conditions, to view the lecture at our own pace, listen to them more than once, make pauses where necessary and thus better understand and learn the content.” - Slovenian Student, (DSIS, 2022).

“There is such a big difference between everyday life at school before and after corona. It's one thing to be able to sit at home and rest when I need to in my own bed. Another thing is that everything is stored and posted. When you have chronic pain, it is difficult to keep up. Now I can pause the lecture, reflect and rewind. It has clearly saved me.” Norwegian Student, (Arnesen, 2021).

Already before COVID-19, students with disabilities frequently called for higher education institutions to implement the recordings of lectures. Often academic staff were hesitant to comply with such requests, citing fears of empty lecture rooms, intellectual property concerns, or technical difficulties. The pandemic has now shown that from a technical perspective, the provision of recordings of lectures is a very achievable goal for institutions, and that for some students, recordings are a very important support for accessibility and inclusion.

Interestingly, across most of the partner countries, disability officers have experienced an increase of students who want to continue to work from home post-lockdown from cohorts that would previously never have requested similar supports e.g., students with social

anxiety, ASD and ADHD. Unsurprisingly, as higher education institutions have begun to return to mostly in-person learning, institutions have received much greater requests for recording of live teaching activities as an individual reasonable accommodation.

This suggests that some student's attitudes to aspects on distance learning are changing and that the COVID-19 has changed the expectations of some students with disabilities about what supports they might benefit from.

No Going Back?

As the impact of the COVID-19 crises is further mitigated, public health restrictions have eased across Europe and the higher education sector has welcomed students back to campus. This has left the sector with strategic decisions to make about what to incorporate and retain from ‘lockdown learning’ now and in their future provision.

At both a European and a national strategy level, there appears to be a growing support for more options to be provided in the mode of study in our education systems into the future, and a greater emphasis on distance learning through the provision of more fully online, blended/hybrid and hy-flex options.

In 2021, the European Union launched the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027), (European Commission, 2020), which sets out a common vision of high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe, and aims to support the adaptation of the education and training systems of Member States to the digital age.

As part of the implementation of this plan, a European Framework for Blended Learning (European Commission, 2021) for primary and secondary education was developed, which sets out “the right of all learners to quality and inclusive school education”. It highlights that good practice includes “the blending of school site and distance learning environments in order to create more flexibility and appropriate conditions for learning.” Amongst the stated actions in the plan are a commitment to support the digital transformation plans of education and training institutions through Erasmus+ cooperation projects.

In 2022, the European Education and Culture Executive Agency released ‘Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe’, (European Commission, 2022), a set of guidelines intended to advise policy makers on designing policy to boost equity and inclusion in Member States. The guidelines underpinning the principal regarding flexibility state that higher education institutions should be enabled to organise “flexible study modes, blended and distance learning” in order to “accommodate the needs of the diverse student population.”

The European Universities Association state in their current strategy to 2030 entitled Universities Without Walls, that “The nature and structure of universities will be hybrid. They will be open as physical and virtual spaces and will work to cultivate both of these when engaging with society. In the future, this will entail that physical and digital learning and research environments must be designed in a holistic way to accommodate the different needs of a diverse university community and allow for flexible and blended approaches.”, (EUA, 2021:5). The strategy recognises the equal importance of in-person and online provision, and promotes flexibility and choice as key enablers of greater diversity.

Equally on the national strategy level, there is similar evidence of increasing commitment to offering greater levels of distance learning across many of the partner countries.

In 2021 for example, the Norwegian Ministry of Education launched a national strategy for digital transformation in the higher education sector (2021-2025), (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2021). It states that universities and university colleges must provide more decentralised and flexible study options to facilitate greater access to higher education. The strategy further states that the digital programmes and tools higher education institutions develop to implement the strategy must meet the requirements of the Equality and Discrimination Act regarding the universal design of digital services and learning resources. A follow-up document further outlining detail on the strategy, (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2022) offers a commitment to increasing access to flexible education programmes, which it describes as “programmes with multiple options for learning activities in respect of time, place, scope and progression”.

The current Irish National Access Plan for higher education (Government of Ireland, 2022) highlights that the “evidence emerging calls for continued blended or hybrid learning post-Covid as a means of creating more accessible and flexible modes of learning for students”, (p.39). In response, the plan contains a specific objective to “support priority group students who study on a flexible basis and to promote flexible teaching and learning practices” (p.23), with an underpinning action to “enable a blended and inclusive student experience based on inclusive learning principles”, (p.60).

These are just some of many examples of similar national commitments in LINK partner countries across Europe.

And Yet...We're Going Back. But Why?

This paper has demonstrated that in terms of policy and strategy, there is significant support for greater levels of distance learning through the provision of more fully online, blended/hybrid and hy-flex options.

And yet, as countries have emerged from lockdown, the majority of LINK partners report that the rush ‘back to normal’ is evident, with most institutions returning to a largely in-person offering. Only a small number of institutions LINK partners have engaged with have stated that they intend to maintain balance in offering distance and in-person learning. Fewer still have implemented significant levels of hy-flex provision which offer students choice in the mode of study.

So why is that the case? Perhaps it is because significant challenges undoubtedly remain in the provision of blended/hybrid learning, and in particular hy-flex learning. Equally, perceptions that in-person learning is optimal remain culturally dominant.

Sectoral stakeholders have repeatedly highlighted the following barriers to implementation with LINK partners in our dialogue with them to prepare for the development of this paper:

- Low awareness of evidence-based teaching practices and studies on how blended and hy-flex learning affects students' learning process - the theoretical base needs to be further developed and disseminated.
- Large financial outlay required for new classrooms fitted out to deliver distance, blended and hy-flex learning. In particular regarding hy-flex learning, significant investments may be required in technology, and it is perceived that more than one teacher may be needed in the classroom to successfully operate a hy-flex model.
- Training and professional development is required to provide good quality distance, blended or hy-flex teaching. In particular with hy-flex, most teachers feel that it is very difficult to equally engage online and in-person groups of students at the same time, so it is perceived that in the end, both get less than they should from the experience.
- Lack of appropriate technology and technical support staff to facilitate quality experiences which match or surpass that of traditional in-person learning.
- Perceived difficulties in arranging group work in blended and hy-flex provision.
- Perceptions of reduced student engagement in online environments.
- In hy-flex provision, a perception that students in the classroom will gain more attention than their online counterparts.
- Logistical problems regarding timetabling of blended learning, for example, if lectures are online and practical or lab work on campus, some students cannot come to the faculty on time. With hy-flex provision, the choice offered to students on which mode they participate in is perceived to cause potential logistical issues with in-person classroom capacity, as it may be unknown how many students will come to class and how many will be online on a given day.

These may represent some of the reasons why greater numbers of higher education institutions have not continued to provide a greater balance of in-person and distance learning as public health restrictions eased.

Conclusion - Learning from the Experience

COVID-19 forcing higher education institutions in Europe to offer distance learning was clearly not a desirable situation. Yet, while the experience of students with disabilities was mixed, we must recognise that for some students, the online or sometimes hybrid learning mode increased the accessibility of education for them.

Hybrid and hy-flex learning options, in particular the choice to follow classes online or attend on-campus, are clearly desired by a significant portion of students with disabilities.

“The option to learn from home on days when I may be struggling would be an enormous comfort” - Irish student. (AHEAD, 2021).

“The possibility to study from home brought me peace of mind. Now I hope that the university has learned from this, and that also after the pandemic hybrid education stays a possibility.” - Dutch Student. (Lont, 2022)

“Am thrilled by on-line studies. I can see a lot more positive than negative sides of this kind of study. I realise that participating in society is necessary and useful for us, but sometimes being at lectures at university is simply not possible. If we miss a lecture, we cannot listen and participate in debates or ask questions when something is unclear. That is why it felt so great last year, everything being online. I finally felt as an equal with regard to attending lectures and other study obligations.” - Slovenian student (DSIS, 2021).

Undoubtedly, many aspects of the alternative assessment approaches and the creative digital teaching techniques synonymous with the best practice which emerged during COVID-19, were also valued by students with disabilities, in particular the access to recordings of lectures and the move away from timed exams to more inclusive methods.

The experiences of partners and the evidence collected, suggests that the provision of more distance, blended/hybrid and hy-flex learning, will enable greater flexibility, choice and autonomy for students with disabilities. It may also reduce the demand for certain reasonable accommodations and enable disabled students to be more successful in their study.

However, we must highlight that providing distance, hybrid or hy-flex learning does not necessarily mean a programme is more accessible in and of itself. Special attention still needs to be paid to the accessibility of digital tools which are used for online delivery, the accessibility of online teaching and learning materials, and the inclusiveness of pedagogical approaches. Additionally, we need to recognise that many students with disabilities also strongly favoured in-person learning, and felt the traditional mode of learning was more accessible and desirable for them.

So, the key learning is that flexibility and choice are key to an optimal experience that caters for the needs of all.

This appears to be recognised in European strategy and policy, and echoed in many national policies, and yet the experience of LINK partners suggests institutions have largely returned to delivering programmes in the manner they did pre-pandemic – largely fully in-person.

We advise that institutions use this crucial juncture to take stock. It is vital that we learn from the experiences during the pandemic and to use this opportunity to make higher education in Europe more accessible for students with disabilities.

When he was working to form the United Nations in the aftermath of World War Two, Winston Churchill famously stated “Never let a good crisis go to waste”. It is a phrase that has been frequently recited during the COVID19-pandemic. The phrase reminds us that dramatic change, however difficult to endure, inevitably uncovers fresh insights, and points to opportunities for growth. Let us make the most of these opportunities and let as many students as possible benefit from the fresh insights this crisis has brought.

Some of good practices which emerged have shown that many students with disabilities benefit from the possibilities of distance, blended and hy-flex learning. Students that never even thought studying would be an option for them, may now see (digital) doors of higher educational institutes open up to them. Some who struggled with in-person learning pre-pandemic thrived with the introduction of new approaches. We have also witnessed the huge negative impact online learning during COVID-19 had on others. Many suffered from the isolation and a lack of vital peer support.

Moreover, it is clear that introducing flexibility and choice wherever we can is vital, and will help us to respond to the increasing variability in our classrooms.

There are many practical and logistical hurdles to overcome for nations, institutions and staff to make distance, blended and hy-flex learning options a mainstay of our system. It's a huge challenge to find a good balance that suits every learner and every teacher.

And of course, we need more evidence-based research to emerge to ensure the flexibility offered in distance, blended and hy-flex provision is matched by quality.

In the meantime, let's keep practicing and pioneering. Let's keep the conversation going and listen to the advantages and disadvantages voiced by students and teachers. Let's see diversity as the norm and talk to as many diverse groups as possible to understand their experiences and needs. Let's focus not on what somebody has, but on what somebody needs to study and be successful.

With the many valuable lessons learned from the worldwide crisis, we can never go back to how it was. We can only learn and move forward towards a more inclusive approach where every person has equal opportunity to learn and thrive.

Bibliography:

AHEAD. (2021). *Learning from Home During Covid-19 2020/21: A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities*. AHEAD Educational Press. <https://www.ahead.ie/news-learning-from-home-2021-report>

Arnesen, M. (2021, 19 April). *Kronisk syke Embla har fått det mye bedre som student under koronapandemien*. <https://khrono.no/kronisk-syke-embla-har-fatt-det-mye-bedre-som-student-under-koronapandemien/565639>

DSIS. (2021). *Disabled Students and Online Study During Covid*. Unpublished Survey.

DSIS. (2022). *Hybrid Studies: Studies for the Future*. Unpublished Survey.

ECIO. (2020, July 17). *Studeren met een autismespectrumstoornis (ASS)*. <https://ecio.nl/blogs/studeren-met-een-autismespectrumstoornis-ass/>

European Association of Universities (EUA). (2021). *Universities Without Walls*. EUA.

European Commission. (2020). *Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 Resetting education and training for the digital age*. European Commission: Brussels. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0624&from=EN>

European Commission. (2021). *A Framework for Blended Learning*. European Commission: Luxemburg. https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/files/news/framework_for_blended_learning.pdf

European Commission. (2022). *Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/631280>

Government of Ireland. (2022). *National Access Plan: A strategic action plan for equity of access, participation and success in higher education 2022 to 2028*. Government of Ireland. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b156c-national-access-plan-2022-to-2028/>

HOP. (2022, Mar. 14). *Students with a disability do not want to go back to 'normal'*. <https://dub.uu.nl/en/news/students-disability-do-not-want-go-back-normal>

Inspectie van het Onderwijs. (2021, Oct. 12). *Factsheet - Gevolgen van 16 maanden corona voor het hoger onderwijs*. <https://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/documenten/publicaties/2021/10/12/factsheet-gevolgen-van-16-maanden-corona-ho>

Ieder(in), JongPIT, LSVb. (2021). *Factsheet vragenlijst online Onderwijs*. <https://iederin.nl/deel-jouw-ervaring-online-onderwijs-in-het-nieuwe-schooljaar/>

Lont, T. (2022, Jan. 31). *Studeren met een functiebeperking: 'Mijn studiesucces is de afgelopen twee jaar enorm verbeterd'*. <https://www.folia.nl/actueel/150014/studeren-met-een-functiebeperking-mijn-studiesucces-is-de-afgelopen-twee-jaar-enorm-verbeterd>

Low, A. (2020, 12 August). *Three months to make a difference? The Disabled Students' Commission's seven-point action plan*. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/08/12/three-months-to-make-a-difference-the-disabled-students-commissions-seven-point-action-plan/>

National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP). (2020). *Covid-19: Disabled Students in Higher Education: Student Concerns and Institutional Challenges*. National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP).

Norwegian Ministry of Education. (2021). *Strategi for digital omstilling i universitets- og høyskolesektoren*. Norwegian Ministry of Education.
<https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/c151afba427f446b8aa44aa1a673e6d6/no/pdfs/kd-strategi-digital-omstilling.pdf>

Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. (2022). *Flexible and decentralised education at vocational colleges, university colleges and universities*.
https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/a8e31ac92f1244d0ac3644d4a1c08d03/flexible-an-decentralised-education_uu.pdf

Torgersen, H. (2021, January 18). *Fra stryk til A med digital undervisning*.
<https://www.nrk.no/rogaland/studenter-gjor-det-bedre-med-digital-undervisning-1.15322457>

Swedish Higher Education Authority, (2021, March 15). *Studenternas studiemiljö och hälsa efter omställningen till distansutbildning vårterminen 2020*.
<https://www.uka.se/download/18.3fca4e4d177db4cf57265de/1615828399477/PM%202021-03-16%20Studenternas%20arbetsmilj%C3%B6%20och%20h%C3%A4lsa%20efter%20omst%C3%A4llningen%20VT2020.pdf>.

APPENDIX - Current policies, practices and initiatives in partner countries relevant to this paper

Throughout Europe, LINK partners took many actions to support the sector throughout the Covid-19 lockdowns, and many good practices emerged. Some examples of actions taken by LINK partners, as well as links to resources and key research and policy documents from partner countries, are listed below.

Ireland

- AHEAD has been extremely active in attempting to promote teaching and learning conditions that would facilitate or add weight to a call for more online learning provision and creative and inclusive pedagogy in higher and further education in Ireland. While not all are not directly related to the implementation of greater distance learning provision in Ireland, all make a contribution in promoting any potential transition to greater options and choice in the mode of deliver. These include practices, key projects and research. Examples of these are:
 - The annual UDL Badge, (approx. 700+ successful applicants last year and 1000+ have commenced this year's iteration).
 - Learning from Home Research: AHEAD conducted two research projects informed by the experiences of students with disabilities during Covid. Both explored the narratives and experiences of disabled students as they navigated the pivot to distance learning (see references).
 - [Discover AT Tool](#) – The AHEAD website now includes a free tool, enabling students to examine the efficacy of Assistive Technology.
 - Ahead has recently added a new [Interactive Data Dashboard](#) to their website, where one can explore historical data on students with disabilities in higher education in Ireland, informing policymakers of the diversity of the student body, the rationale being that a diverse student body requires a transition to hybrid learning. AHEAD conducts annual research which informs this dashboard, which demonstrates that the number of students with disabilities engaging in disability supports is increasing annually, (AHEAD, 2020).
 - Following the publication of two "Learning from Home" projects, further research entitled "Learning in Limbo" is currently in progress. This research will examine 'post-lockdown learning' for disabled students in order to examine if any of the changes perpetuated by COVID 19, in particular those found advantageous for many, have been retained as normative pedagogical practice.
 - The Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education is a key policy document that is published in eight-year cyclic iterations in Ireland. The primary objective of the Plan is to promote avenues into tertiary education for target groups that are traditionally unrepresented in higher education through the provision of funding, guidelines, oversight, national targets and strategic commitments. To this end, it is a key enabler that propagates equity of access for priority groups that include disabled students. AHEAD submitted a robust and detailed submission predicated upon a three point plan that included a call for UDL (as a state of the art, modern pedagogical framework that aims to foster inclusive practices) and up to date assistive technology (AT) for all students. UDL and adequate AT provision are considered vital if distance learning is to become normative practice in Ireland.
 - AHEAD has contributed submissions to a number of public consultation calls that are underpinned by an overarching objective of promoting inclusive pedagogy that frequently call for flexibility and choice to be enhanced in higher and further education. Frequently, these submissions are informed by similar evidence and

recommendations that have been explored in this article. Examples of pertinent submissions include [Next Steps](#), an exploration of post lockdown discourse and [The Seven Cs of Embedding Student Success: A Toolkit for Higher Education Institutions](#) which aimed to advance equity of opportunity for all in Irish Higher Education.

- AHEAD facilitates an annual conference which analyses the narratives of students with disabilities in higher and further education.
- [ARK](#): Accessibility Resources and Know How. ARK is an innovative model, consisting of free, short courses, designed by AHEAD that provide practical resources and know-how to support a range of institutional staff to be more accessible in their roles, while supporting colleges and centres to consider a whole institution approach to digital accessibility, meet their legal obligations, boost accessibility compliance, and provide a better digital experience for all.

Norway

- A report based on a survey of academic teachers in Norway and their experience with full digital teaching: [Online Teaching in the Time of COVID-19- Academics' experiences in Norway](#)
- [Digital Student Preferences: a study of blended learning in Norwegian higher education](#)

Slovenia

- DŠIS has been active in providing guidance and support in relation to accessible online teaching during lockdown. Recommendations focused on accessibility of [virtual classes or meetings](#), [accessible digital learning materials](#) and [remote accessible assessments or exams](#).
- DŠIS has prepared [Guidelines for working with students with Asperger Syndrome](#).
- During and after lockdown DŠIS has organized different trainings and workshops, either on its own or in cooperation with the University of Ljubljana, University of Maribor and several private higher education institutions. Some of these trainings were recorded and can be found on-line.
- DŠIS has conducted two surveys among disabled students, one on the experiences of disabled students with on-line studies during lockdown, carried out in June 2021 and one after the ease of measures when studying either returned to solely face to face on campus or as hybrid synchronous classes because of some remaining covid related measures on social distancing, carried out in January 2022.
- DŠIS has carried out two consultation meetings with disabled students during lockdown in January and February 2021 to gather the experiences of disabled students with on-line studies and to give advice on how to advocate and arrange reasonable exam and assessment accommodations for the winter exam period in an on-line setting.
- Post lockdown DŠIS has carried out two consultation meetings with disabled students to gather experiences, good practices and problems faced by disabled students when partially or fully returning to on-campus studies. The meetings were held in February 2022.
- Post lockdown DŠIS has carried out a survey followed by three consultation meetings with higher education staff to better understand their attitudes and preferences in relation to continuing with hybrid or blended learning also in the future, especially in relation to disabled students.
- Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency has published [Guidelines for hybrid approach in tertiary education](#).

- Ministry of Education, Science and Sport has launched a [call](#) for all Slovenian public higher education institutions for pilot projects dealing with Curriculum transformation, among other things focusing also on digital transformation and upscaling of digital skills in higher education. The pilot projects will begin in November 2022.

Sweden

- Leijon, M & Lundgren, B (2019). Connecting Physical and Virtual Spaces in a HyFlex Pedagogical Model with Focus on Teacher Interaction. [EJ1220576.pdf \(ed.gov\)](#)
- Research project on university teachers and hybrid teaching <https://mau.se/en/research/projects/university-teachers-profession-in-post-pandemic-hybrid-teaching-and-learning-environment/>

The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, higher education institutions may decide themselves whether they offer distance learning. In practice, on-campus education seems to be the norm again. ECIO encourages institutions to also offer online education as well. In an [article](#), ECIO offers tips on how to organise hybrid learning. Over the last years, good initiatives have started within institutions to create more flexibility and therefore more accessibility for students with disabilities. Examples of these are:

- At Avans University of Applied Sciences flexible education is included in their [ambition plan](#). During the pandemic, Avans felt extra urgency to introduce hybrid possibilities. In 2021, Avans started the [pilot hybrid learning](#). Classrooms have the necessary equipment to organise this and teachers are trained on hybrid skills.
- [Radboud University](#) Nijmegen introduced extra facilities in 2020 to make hybrid education possible.
- NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences in Leeuwarden started a few years ago with the [platform Innovation Lab](#). It supports innovative projects and courses at and with NHL Stenden. The principles of Universal Design for Learning and Design Based Education are leading in the further development of this platform. Students can enter the study programme at every moment of the academic year as the entire programme can be followed online and independently by students. This was already the case before the pandemic. For students who have the need for support from the institution, there are two starting moments each academic year.

The UK

NADP was very pro-active during the active phase of the pandemic when we suddenly moved into lockdown. Guidance and support was offered to academic and professional staff as well as individual support workers. Examples of support include...

- [A Covid-19 Resource hub with NADP resources and those from partner organisations](#)
- Three psychological support videos from a senior clinical psychologist for members and their families
- Support document to obtain early vaccination for disability practitioners working directly with students
- Presentation video on lack of motivation and working from home
- [Working from home and home educating – factsheet](#)

- ['Ensuring your webinars are accessible' – for members to share with academic staff](#)
- [Working with partners we produced guidance for people supporting students with vision impairment](#)
- [Working with partners we produces guidance for studying remotely for autistic students \(student and full version\)](#)