

CRUI Working Group on Promotion of the Italian University System

How Italian Universities reacted to COVID-19

University moved to online education

Italy was the first EU member state to order closure of all schools and higher education institutions, before the entire country was placed under lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Starting from the beginning of March, Italian Universities reacted quickly to a critical and unprecedented situation and in about one week, universities moved from on-site teaching activities to on-line activities.

The universities thus relied first of all on existing resources and tools with the use of e-learning platforms, the activation of several virtual classrooms, the production of digital contents and guidelines for teachers implementing virtual learning environments.

Universities have been active on-line throughout the entire lockdown assuring the totality of teaching activities, exams and graduations. As borders shut to reduce the spread of the virus, international students across the globe moved back home. International students were supported in reaching their home or during their stay in Italy maintaining their online activities according to their decision: given the existing travel restrictions, the fact that students can attend classes disregarding their locations is of paramount importance.

Italian universities are making a huge effort so that all international students are adequately informed and supported about the crisis and can access to all the services during the lockdown.

In the next semester 20-21 teaching activities will be maintained with a blended learning approach to allow international students to attend distance courses if the emergency does not allow to start teaching in presence.

Universities reacted supporting research work and services against Covid-19.

With regard to research, several actions were implemented starting, in particular, from the beginning of March. Several Italian universities dedicated special allocation of funds and collected donation for fighting Coronavirus.

There was a huge mobilization of resources and initiatives to support Hospitals and Territorial Health Agencies in fighting Coronavirus. As the coronavirus pandemic was spreading and the number of patients surging, students from the medical faculties, and not only, have volunteered their services to support the battle against COVID-19. Other faculties' staff and students at universities are also joining the fight through different solidarity actions.

Despite the limited financial resources allocated by the Italian government for research and development, as reported by OCSE 'Education at a glance' (2019), Italian scientists are quite active, producing a significant number of high-quality publications and research products. This is evidenced by the position of Italian Universities in the international rankings as recently reported by THE (Times Higher Education) that classifies 38 Italian Universities among the first 500 University in the world for number of citations.

The excellence in research and education of our Italian University made it possible a fast and huge response to the crisis by the Italian HE system. Each University has launched specific research programs, finalized to leverage hospitals and develop innovative devices and operative processes (also related to the post-Covid phase), and to promote research finalized to monitor people and to track the diffusion of COVID-19.

Italian Universities: an inclusive system

The Italian university system is an inclusive system that allows international students, both from Europe and from outside Europe, to pay contained university fees that are based on family income, since on average two thirds of the costs of higher education are financed by the Italian State. This allows to deserving international students, regardless of their origin, to access a high-quality university system, where both teaching and research are integrated and produce excellent results, as demonstrated by international rankings (see contribution of the working group ranking).

In addition to the inclusivity of the university system, Italy also offers a health system that guarantees universal coverage accessible to all international students enrolled in Italian universities. Access to the national health system takes place by paying a modest fee, which guarantees the student full coverage.

The presence of polyclinics / university hospitals has implied that the dialogue between university researchers and regional health authorities has been directing the strategic choices of policy makers in a significant way.

In this context each University has promoted its own actions finalized to support its students; these actions include the organization of online meetings for both incoming students in Italy and outgoing students who remained abroad; webinars and online psychological and medical consulting; continuous assistance regarding both teaching related problems and practical problems; practical support during the lockdown phase since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak.