

Internationalization of higher education and professional training at the CIHEAM in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic:

new challenges, new opportunities

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Since 1962, the CIHEAM has been devoted to the development of agriculture, fisheries and sustainable food systems and to supporting the inclusive growth of rural and coastal Mediterranean territories. We promote multilateral cooperation through postgraduate education, specialized training for professionals, networked research, scientific diplomacy and political partnerships. This objective matches with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) n°4 entitled “*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*”.

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was a big challenge for the CIHEAM to continue its core activities of teaching and research, as until then most of the CIHEAM training programs (both Master and advanced courses) were delivered face-to-face on the 4 CIHEAM campuses in Bari, Chania, Montpellier and Zaragoza. Indeed, we still believe that inclusive and high quality education is also linked to the acquisition of new experiences and to new links with colleagues, well-recognized experts and institutions.

First, to make digitalization successful, the CIHEAM reacted quickly to plan and fund professional training for training managers (program coordinators), lecturers and interpreters about delivery of online courses. Investments in new equipment and tools such as learning platforms, videoconferences, online interpretation were also required. With the agreement of the CIHEAM Governing Board, the General Secretariat provided extra funds for this to the Institutes, where the local budget was also adapted. Special care (flexibility and psychological support) by committed teachers and staff was given to students - especially non-EU students - during lockdown periods.

In order to keep our online classes accessible to as many students as possible, the CIHEAM education teams made huge efforts to review the content of the programs so as to meet with students' and young professionals' current needs. In addition, the pandemic prompted several Institutes of the CIHEAM to propose language classes online before the academic year starts, and this will remain in the future.

This significant evolution of the CIHEAM training offer from face-to-face classes to a hybrid modality of organisation of courses and evaluation of students needs to be monitored in the long term to check the inclusiveness and quality of online courses compared to face-to-face classes by asking students for their feedback. The indicators implemented by the European Union could help to measure the progress made in this field in relation with SDG n°4.

Even if the emerging concept of virtual reality is coming up increasingly within the educational field, possibly to reach a wider audience by extending our campuses virtually, the CIHEAM remains convinced that online training should not replace face-to-face classes completely as interactions in real life and work on the field are paramount. A hybrid way to teach (blending approach) could help find a new balance, both for Master programmes and continuous training, and open up to a new public.