

# Higher Education's Response to COVID-19: A Map of USAID Partner Countries SUMMARY BRIEF



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The [2018 USAID Education Policy](#) identifies the ability of higher education institutions to serve as central actors in development. The [Higher Education Program Framework](#) illustrates this vision showing that by conducting and applying research, delivering quality education, and engaging with communities, higher education institutions are valuable assets to furthering locally-led development and, especially in the time of COVID-19, responding to crises in low and middle income countries.

USAID recently undertook, with support from a team of virtual interns, a [landscape map](#) which identifies the actions taken by higher education systems and institutions in select USAID partner countries to respond directly to and mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on learners, institutions, and communities. The findings represent the actions taken by national education agencies and a total of 144 higher education institutions within 24 USAID partner countries.

## TECHNICAL AREAS



### Continuity of Learning

Governments and higher education institutions sought to mitigate the disruption of learning caused by the shuttering of physical campuses. Where possible, institutions moved instruction and services to web-based platforms but faced equity and accessibility challenges from the digital divide. They also experienced constraints in resources and capacities needed to fully bridge the gap. National education agencies often focused their efforts on designing plans and developing resources for primary and secondary education levels, leaving higher education institutions largely responsible for creating and managing crisis response plans on their own.

#### IMPACT EXAMPLE

The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology in the Dominican Republic shared how higher education institutions were transitioning to digital platforms, including Moodle, Google Classroom, Edmodo, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams.

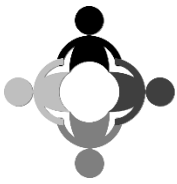


### Research and Innovation

Many higher education institutions utilized laboratory and research capacity to produce locally-sourced, innovative solutions. Labs manufactured personal protective equipment, sanitizing supplies, testing materials, and low-cost ventilators. Likewise, faculty deployed their academic disciplines into developing crisis response plans and mitigation strategies for future outbreaks. In many cases, the innovations produced by higher education institutions were less expensive, took a shorter time to produce, and were better suited to address the unique challenges faced by their local community. A strong history of research and innovation capacity before the pandemic often accompanied the institutions that successfully produced ventilators and other COVID-19 response innovations.

#### IMPACT EXAMPLE

Makerere University, through the ResilientAfrica Network, designed a portable housing tent called Epitent for emergency health care and isolation needs.



## Community Engagement

Higher education institutions supported their local communities by providing public health-focused services including COVID-19 testing and treatment, mental health counseling, information about nutrition and social assistance programs, and support to educators at the primary and secondary level. The campuses of higher education institutions became distribution sites for nutrition kits and personal protective equipment (PPE). In several cases, higher education communities organized and ran grassroots fundraisers for faculty and students. Community engagement was found to be generally informal and not conducted through established partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or non-profits.

### IMPACT EXAMPLE

HEIs supported public health initiatives ranging from mental health counseling (De La Salle University Philippines), to free legal assistance (University of the Philippines), to food security and nutrition initiatives (Don Mariano Marcos Memorial State University in the Philippines and University of Muhammadiyah Malang Indonesia).



## Communications

### IMPACT EXAMPLE

New Vision University in Georgia launched social media campaigns allowing individuals affected by COVID-19 to share their stories and contribute to the response by promoting opportunities to donate blood and supplies.

Higher education institutions were often observed to be closely connected with their local communities. As trusted sources of information, higher education institutions facilitated the communication of reliable and accurate information surrounding COVID-19 for faculty, students, staff, and the wider community. Official institution websites provided frequent and substantive updates around transmission rates and mitigation strategies as well as highlighting positive news coverage of learner, educator, and institutional efforts to combat the virus. Institutional social media pages also helped elevate content from official institution websites as well as breaking news stories.

The Strengthening Higher Education Access in Malawi (SHEAMA) activity focuses on increasing Malawi's skilled and employable workforce – especially rural adolescent girls and young women and vulnerable young men. In response to COVID-19, Photo Credit: SHEAMA.



# REGIONS



Higher education institutions in Africa closed their doors to mitigate the spread of the disease, but many institutions struggled to migrate their teaching online. Even for institutions with existing distance learning platforms, students and faculty faced connectivity issues as well as limited access to dependable and consistent internet due to unreliable technological infrastructure. African higher education institutions were highly engaged in producing locally manufactured medical equipment, especially equipment suited to the local context or that used locally available materials. By taking a local approach, they successfully bypassed the often-disrupted global supply chain.

**Spotlight:** The Department of Higher Education, Science, and Technology of South Africa negotiated favorable rates with mobile network operators to ensure that economically disadvantaged students had access to the Internet.



Asian higher education institutions were the first to close, but also the first to reopen, some as early as May 2020. During this time, a high disparity in connectivity was observed between institutions with existing ICT capacity and infrastructure and those without. Institutions that had already migrated part or all of their instruction online were then able to train and troubleshoot with educators from institutions that had to catch up at the start of the pandemic. Labs on campus were also observed producing PPE and disinfectants as well as designing new innovations such as UV-powered mobile disinfecting units for local hospitals. The East Asia and Pacific sub-region was characterized by an exceptionally high usage of social media platforms to ensure learners, educators, and other higher education system stakeholders received key COVID-19 updates.

**Spotlight:** At the Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB) in Indonesia, a physics department faculty member designed and prototyped a mobile disinfecting unit that leverages ultraviolet light as a sterilizing agent for use in local hospitals.



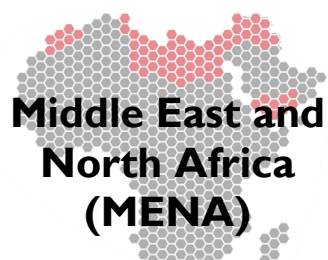
In the Europe and Eurasia region, higher education institutions were seen moving not just classrooms, but student services online. Institutions transitioned library resources, mental health counseling, career services, and guidance counseling to internet-based platforms together with instructional material. Alongside the production of PPE, faculty and students applied research towards understanding the characteristics of virus transmission, disease prevalence within certain groups, clinical management, and the effectiveness of treatment methods. Community outreach efforts revolved around public health awareness campaigns and volunteer assistance to hospitals and other healthcare organizations.

**Spotlight:** At the Technical University of Moldova, psychologists from the Department of Social and Human Sciences launched an initiative to counsel students and faculty to help them manage anxiety and/or negative emotions.



Higher education institutions in the LAC region saw varying levels of government guidance following the outbreak of COVID-19. All national education agencies published health guidelines for educational institutions in their country, while individual higher education institutions developed specific plans for the shift to remote learning. Governments in the region showed particular concern for inequalities in internet access, negotiating fixed pricing and expanded access for remote learners. Institutions manufactured and/or donated PPE, hand sanitizer, laboratory equipment, and hand-washing stations to offset shortages while staff and students volunteered expertise to testing facilities and hospitals. Community support in the region ranged from providing nutritional kits to supporting distance learning education programs for children and youth.

**Spotlight:** The Consortium of Guatemalan Universities partnered with the Ministry of Education to coordinate and contribute to an educational blog as part of the government's distance learning education program for children and youth in primary and secondary school, Aprendo en Casa (I learn at home).



National education agencies in the region offered broad guidance on virus mitigation strategies and timelines for return to in-person learning. Where possible, institutions maintained regularly scheduled exams but were forced to introduce alternative testing approaches along with a shift to virtual instruction. Notably, all observed countries offered educators additional compensation and training to adapt to remote learning. Research at higher education institutions in the region responded to the pandemic by pivoting to monitoring the virus's impact on marginalized communities, social media, the environment, and businesses. Students and student groups volunteered with charities and other local organizations as well as making use of social media to build an online community of social support. Similarly, faculty used social media as a convening platform to provide support and a place for collaboration around virtual education strategies.

**Spotlight:** The Venture Lab at the American University in Cairo (AUC) offered a special "Quarantine Clinic," providing community entrepreneurs with mentorship and consultation on the special challenges their startups faced during the pandemic.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Confronted with the sudden disruption to learning and livelihoods caused by COVID-19, higher education systems and institutions demonstrated resilience and a capacity to serve as central actors in crisis response. As nations recover from the pandemic and look towards future crises, donors, governments, and higher education institutions must use this learning opportunity to build robust, resilient higher education systems that can withstand unforeseen shocks. The following recommendations enable higher education institutions to better support their countries and communities:

- First and foremost, higher education institutions need to be able to **maintain continuity of learning**. Ensuring the capability of institutions to provide equitable and accessible learning through more diverse platforms and methods not only benefits learners in crisis situations but also under more normal circumstances.
- Also demonstrated by this analysis, continuing to **build the research capacity** of higher education institutions may contribute to country resilience during unexpected shocks but is also valuable in a country's journey to self reliance.
- Moreover, higher education institutions should be **integrated into larger community**, country, and regional networks to help leverage local expertise and contribute to a coordinated response.

**Read the full report at:** <https://www.edu-links.org/resources/higher-education-response-covid-19-landscape-map-usaid-partner-countries>