



**Covid-19:
CIHEAM
rises to the
challenge**

Solidarity at CIHEAM during the Covid-19 pandemic



As the Mediterranean region was hit strongly by the Covid-19 pandemic, there have been many actions of solidarity in various countries, especially to support the health care workers who were on the front line to save lives. Within CIHEAM, expressions and actions of solidarity have helped the CIHEAM community keep spirits high during these hard times.

As an intergovernmental organisation, CIHEAM places cooperation and solidarity among its core values. Therefore, CIHEAM wished to express institutional solidarity among its staff members and students through a series of initiatives. Firstly, in early March, in line with the Directors of the CIHEAM Institutes, the Secretary General decided to set up a new corporate group on Covid-19, made up of representatives from all the Institutes and led by the General Secretariat, to follow-up the sanitary situation closely and to share all kinds of tips. Later, on 22 March, the President of the CIHEAM Governing Board and the Secretary General published a joint communication to state their support to all members of the CIHEAM community during the pandemic. They also kept the Delegates of the Member States regularly informed. On 15 April, the Delegates of the Member States to the Governing Board* unanimously agreed upon a joint proposal made by the Secretary General and the President of the CIHEAM Governing Board to use the reserve funds of the General Secretariat to help the four Institutes cover additional costs brought about by the pandemic.

*The Governing Board is made up of representatives of the 13 Member States of the CIHEAM: Albania, Algeria, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Portugal, Spain, Tunisia and Turkey.

Besides, as lockdown was enacted in the Mediterranean countries, sometimes keeping people away from their families and their homes, CIHEAM expressed solidarity by helping students who were stressed or wanted to fly back home. Psychological support was provided first at CIHEAM Chania. The same service was offered to students at CIHEAM Bari, but luckily no request was received, while students at CIHEAM Montpellier were provided with phone numbers of psychologists should they need support. CIHEAM Montpellier and CIHEAM Zaragoza expressed their solidarity by helping students to pay their flight tickets to go back home. Grants were extended everywhere as many students had to stay longer in the CIHEAM host countries in order to sit their postponed examinations.

The corporate group on Covid-19 shared information about the repatriation process launched by several countries so that the CIHEAM students could take benefit if they wished. Solidarity was also observed between the students themselves. At CIHEAM Zaragoza, some sent videos and messages of support, which were shared on social media, calling for compliance with the preventive measures against Covid-19

At CIHEAM Bari, several students who were fasting during the holy month of Ramadan prepared food and shared it with other students to create a cheerful atmosphere. CIHEAM Chania set up a radio station to help students stay connected with each other during lockdown and have access to information.

Last but not least, CIHEAM could count on the solidarity of other private or public actors of the neighbourhood. Above all, CIHEAM Chania and CIHEAM Montpellier were able to rely on their usual local suppliers and they never ran short of masks and hand sanitizers to fight the spread of the virus.

CIHEAM Bari will remain deeply grateful to the 2 organisations, namely the Civil Protection Department and the private firm COSMOBRAND, for their donations of up to 25 000 masks since early April (three deliveries). Thanks to them, students and staff at CIHEAM Bari never lacked masks even when supply was short and demand was high in Italy. CIHEAM Bari even donated some of these masks to CIHEAM Chania and CIHEAM Montpellier, where students also live on campus. These actions have highlighted the fact that the CIHEAM Institutes are well-identified and highly appreciated in their environment.

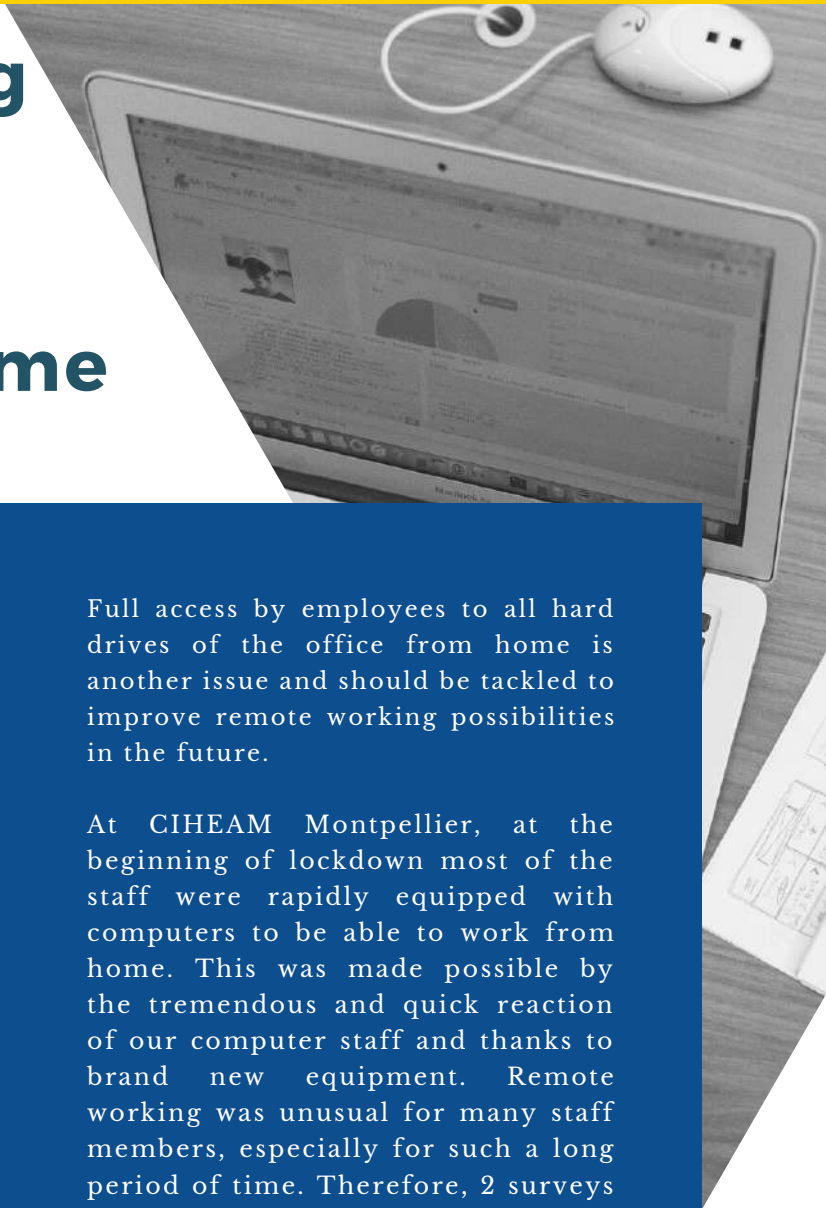
Remote working at CIHEAM: ensuring the continuity of service from home

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown enacted by a number of countries led to widespread use of remote working for as many tasks as possible. Remote working was encouraged by CIHEAM for all, as it was the best way to maintain the continuity of service for students and to keep most of the personnel safe at home and limit the risks of contaminations on the campuses. Generally speaking, it has been implemented without significant difficulties and has been judged positively by many staff members at CIHEAM. The Directors of the Institutes and their teams have done a great job to make it a successful experience.

At CIHEAM Chania, employees were able to choose freely between working in the Institute and remote working (i.e. working from home) as long as there was at least one employee in each department working in the institute to give data access to the distance workers when necessary. It would be interesting to know what percentage of the data needed for the operation of each department is exclusively in hard copy, that is to say not computerised & available online.

Full access by employees to all hard drives of the office from home is another issue and should be tackled to improve remote working possibilities in the future.

At CIHEAM Montpellier, at the beginning of lockdown most of the staff were rapidly equipped with computers to be able to work from home. This was made possible by the tremendous and quick reaction of our computer staff and thanks to brand new equipment. Remote working was unusual for many staff members, especially for such a long period of time. Therefore, 2 surveys were sent to the staff to follow up on their adaptation and the continuity of activity. The first survey was conducted one week after confinement to evaluate problems, needs and necessary improvements regarding the use of new tools and technology; the second was set up 3 weeks later to evaluate their physical and mental well-being, to know how they had coped with the situation so far and how to help them in case of difficulty. A percentage estimation on decrease of activity due to reduction or cessation of partner activities, slowdown in information flows etc., was also requested to help HR management.



At CIHEAM Zaragoza, since the beginning of the state of alarm in mid-March, the recommendations from the Spanish Government were followed, including to stay at home and do remote working. Yes, being at home 24/7 and stop seeing colleagues and friends daily was difficult.

For many of the staff members, remote working was a big challenge, but it was also a great opportunity to improve skills. Before the quarantine began the wonderful IT team gave instructions on how remote working would work, including a communication system for meetings and an app to have access to staff computers in the office. Soon after the quarantine began, it was evident that remote working also provided the flexibility to take care of kids and elders requiring special attention. Colleagues with higher risk of being infected by Covid-19 stayed safe at home decreasing their risk of infection.

For many of the staff, productivity increased. The only negative aspect of remote working is that daily working hours are usually exceeded because it is difficult to set limits on when to stop – not such a big problem since the staff love what they do.

At CIHEAM Bari, the unfortunate spread of Covid-19 throughout Italy led to some exceptional measures. In line with the national legislative framework, since the beginning of March 2020 CIHEAM Bari Institute has authorized and strongly encouraged remote working (“smart-working” in Italy) for all, in order to ensure the continuity of activities, adopt responsible measures of health and safety at work and especially to protect the students community.

The number of daily attendees on the two Italian sites of Valenzano and Tricase Porto was limited to essential services until the end of June 2020. Therefore, IT support and remote technical assistance were provided to allow the employees to rapidly shift their daily work activity to remote working

Furthermore, internal monitoring tools proposed for human resources management were used: in particular, a common activity reporting template and an online survey (see “Focus” below). In general, remote working was a positive experience, even if it does not completely replace the benefits and advantages of working together in the same place.

At the headquarters in Paris, remote working was possible for the staff before the pandemic, but only for a few days in a row. When the pandemic of Covid-19 broke out, and before lockdown was officially introduced, the decision was made quickly to implement remote working for all until further notice. The members of staff were provided with the necessary equipment and regular recommendations on Covid-19.

They use voice messages on WhatsApp to keep in touch and gathered online several times per week on HangOut to follow the state of progress of the main activities. Good practices on remote working were also shared to help staff to find the right balance between private life and professional life, which is paramount especially in the long run.

Online courses: a good way to maintain academic activities for CIHEAM students during lockdown

At CIHEAM Bari, since the early breakout of the pandemic of Covid-19, didactic activities as well as the attendance of training and its related research actions (classroom, laboratory, field) were suspended for about one month until it was technically possible to carry out distance learning (from mid-April).

In the meantime, the educational services have always been guaranteed and continuous virtual support and health monitoring was provided for the resident students, also via informal WhatsApp groups. Despite initial technical difficulties registered for simultaneous internet connection access, online lectures were carried out successfully for all Master's courses (with Zoom-CIHEAM Bari license: live lessons with possibility of registration). Zoom has revealed to be the best IT tool for interaction with students

For the entire duration of didactic activity suspension, the tutors and education team have operated in close coordination with the professors to implement distance learning modules for the three Master's programmes, taking into consideration the specific needs of students. Currently, CIHEAM Bari is ensuring the delivery of training courses as well as tests and project activities.

At CIHEAM Chania, Master's courses were carried out on online during the Covid-19 pandemic. The online platform used for Master's courses is a professional version of Zoom with a monthly fee while two more platforms were used as a trial, namely e-Presence & Jitsi. Examinations were replaced with assignments, presentations and oral exams. Besides, lecturers are evaluated by the students and it will be interesting to see their feedback during this long distance-learning period in order to improve the experience on both sides.

At CIHEAM Zaragoza, at the beginning of the State of Alarm in Spain, both MSc programmes had 3 months of activities remaining. In addition, many of our students went back home to different countries. We decided to continue our activities as normally as possible and to use a combination of apps and software to resume our activities, but this time, online. Lectures continued with live online streaming using YouTube, as it was a simple method for several lecturers with varying levels of computer skills. For students it is a well-known system that can work regardless of the quality of the users' internet connection. Lecturer/student interaction took place via chat. Moodle is a free learning management tool with several options that we also used to continue our activities. We are using Moodle as a method to deliver and receive assignments and provide lecture material. In addition, Moodle is used to do exams and surveys. Finally, communication with students takes place frequently via Google Meet and WhatsApp.

“How I became a YouTuber by accident” (or the use of digital platforms as a tool for online lectures), by Andrés SCHLAGETER from CIHEAM Zaragoza

A couple of months ago the term “YouTuber” was associated to teenagers playing videogames and funny viral videos. If someone had told me in January that by the end of April I'd become a YouTuber I'd have said “no way”, but as Forest Gump said “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get.” But it turns out that by March 2020 the world was affected by one of the most dangerous diseases in the last centuries, Covid-19. Governments forbade all group activities that could spread the disease, including presential lectures. That forced many professionals involved in the education business to find new educational tools. Reorganizing a course from “conventional” to “online” presents a lot of issues, one of the most important challenges being to find new methods to give lectures. Although there are many different systems for organizing online lectures (Zoom, Skype, Google meet, WebEx, YouTube, among others) it's important to know which system adapts better to your needs and budget. In my case, I needed a system to cater for 30 students spread over several countries with unknown internet connection quality. Because I rely on several invited speakers, the system needed to be simple to use and teach; and in terms of budget the closer to zero the better. The budget factor reduced several of my options. Although, many apps have free options, they tend to work with limited features (limited time or number of people allowed). That is why I decided to use a free streaming system (YouTube). These free streaming systems are well-known and use a simple broadcasting method. They can adjust image quality according to the internet quality available, enabling lectures to be streamed regardless of connection quality. Another interesting YouTube feature includes the automatic generation and translation of subtitles which is useful when professors and students come from a wide variety of countries. Automatic subtitle translation is not perfect but is good enough for students to understand most of the lecture even in an unfamiliar language. On the negative side, these platforms have often limited options in terms of interactivity and you need to use external apps (Virtual Studios) to transform it into an interactive platform. Another negative point on using YouTube is that lecturer/student interaction takes place via chat. This limits communication between participants and a moderator is needed to compile and select questions for the lecturer. In summary, the decision to use YouTube or another system will depend mostly on your needs as an educator.

