

## Impact of Covid-19 on your educational activities

*By Prof. Christian Loewe*

### Introduction:

The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 has led to fundamental changes and implications in all parts of our daily lives worldwide. Aside from the health, economic and social dimensions, professional issues have been substantially affected and changed as well. All these pandemic-related changes and issues are well known and rather well explored. However, less is known so far about the pandemic's impact on Continuing Medical Education (CME) and Professional Development (CPD). The Accreditation Council in Imaging (ACI) observed a 21% drop in applications for accreditation of educational events in 2020, as compared to 2019. This is perceived as a clear indicator for the dramatic influence of the pandemic on continuing medical education. However, detailed information about the influence on the customers' side is still missing. Consequently, the ACI of the European Board of Radiology (EBR) has launched a survey targeted at individual members of the European Society of Radiology (ESR) to learn more about the impact of Covid-19 on the educational activities of radiologists all over the world.

### Method:

The survey was conducted by the Accreditation Council in Imaging (ACI) in 2020. A link to the survey entitled "The impact of Covid-19 on your educational activities" was sent out via email on December 2, 2020, through the ESR. A response deadline of two weeks was given.

A total of 27 questions were defined by the ACI Policy Committee together with the ACI Leadership (comprised of the ACI Scientific Director and the chairs of the ACI Reviewing and Policy Committees). The survey was compiled and executed using Survey Monkey software. The results were analysed by the former ACI leadership consisting of Milos Lucic (ACI Scientific Director for the term 2019-21), Paolo Ricci (Chairperson of the ACI Reviewing Committee for the term 2019-21), and Christian Loewe (Chair of the ACI Policy Committee).

### Results:

The survey reached 119,791 individual ESR members, and out of them, 34,701 opened the mail. However, only 1385 clicked on the survey link, and finally, 934 respondents completed the survey, giving a total response rate of 1.15%. Not all respondents answered all of the questions, so the number of answers received might have been smaller for several questions. ESR members from a total of 105 countries participated in the survey. The majority (43%) of respondents were aged between 40 and 55-years-old, 32% were 40-years-old or younger, and about 21% were between 55 and 75-years-old.

The first group of questions aimed to assess possible differences and changes between the pre-Covid situation as compared to the pandemic year in 2020. To be able to assess these changes, we asked for two different parameters regarding continuing medical education – always referring to both before and since the beginning of the pandemic.

### *Significant drop of attendance in face-to-face educational events*

555 individuals, almost 60% of the respondents, stated that they attended between 1 to 4 face-to-face events per year in the pre-pandemic era, and another 337, 36% of the respondents, attended more than 4. Only 42 respondents stated that they had not attended any face-to-face meetings at all before the Covid-19 outbreak. This group expanded the most since the start of the pandemic, with 629 respondents (67%) not having attended a single face-to-face meeting, 202 (22%) having attended 1-4 per year, and 103 (11%) having attended more than 4.

In relation to the advantages of face-to-face meetings, the respondents pointed out the value of professional networking (32%), social networking (13%), possibility of hands-on teaching and small group settings (26%), as well as being free of other obligations while attending a face-to-face educational event (26%). 45% of respondents answering the respective question claimed to cover costs for travel and housing for face-to-face events themselves, 37% received partial support, and 16% stated that their institution had taken care of the costs.

### *CME/CPD still not mandatory in all countries*

112 respondents (12%) stated that no Continuing Medical Education (CME) or Continuing Professional Development (CPD) system was available in their country. 487 (52%) stated that such a system was available and mandatory, and another 335 (36%) reported that CME and CPD are available as an optional system. The question regarding the suspension of CME/CPD requirements during the pandemic was skipped by 137 colleagues. Of the 797 participants who responded to the question, 455 (57%) stated that the requirements had been suspended or at least reduced since the Covid-19 outbreak. This suspension or reduction, at the moment that the survey was completed (December 2020), applied to about 61% of the respondent in 2020; for the remaining 39%, the reduction/suspension was continued into 2021.

### *Increase of time spent with e-learning materials and webinars*

Exactly one third of all respondents, (n=831) answering the question related to the time spent with e-learning materials (ELM) before the Covid-19 pandemic used to spend more than 20 hours per year with ELMs, slightly more than a third spent about 5 – 20 hours per year with ELMs, and the remaining 30% used to spend less than 5 or no hours with e-learning materials prior to 2020. After spring 2020, these figures have changed and 58% of the respondents were spending more than 20 hours per year with e-learning materials, with only 13% spending less than 5 or no hours with them. The number of respondents spending 5 – 20 hours remained more or less unchanged.

The percentage of colleagues attending more than 10 webinars per year increased from 8% in the pre-pandemic era to 41% in Covid-19 era. Respondents that confirmed having previously spent no time with webinars at all dropped from 32% to 6%.

In general, the users appreciate the fact that on-demand content can be consumed whenever suitable (58%) and the fact that there is no need to take days off or travel (40%). Regarding financial support for the consummation of e-learning materials, the situation is comparable to face-to-face meetings with 48% paying by themselves, 15% receiving partial financial support and 11% getting full funding from their institution. Interestingly, about 25% stated that they only consume e-learning material only if it is free of charge.

### *Attendance at meetings during the pandemic*

50% of respondents answering this question stated that they had not received any protected time to attend online meetings, whereas 24% did receive protected time. Another 15% were only supported with protected time for their attendance at face-to-face meetings. 27% were asked in the pre-pandemic period to attend a certain number of face-to-face meetings per year, and 11% were asked to attend a certain number of online courses per year. For about two thirds of participants, the number of face-to-face meetings required has been revised or suspended since the start of the pandemic, and the use of more e-learning materials was requested. The remaining 64% were not asked by their employers to attend a given number of events, congresses or courses.

### *Mixed views about the future*

There was a clear vote in favour of having a mixture of both face-to-face and e-learning activities with a preference for face-to-face meetings (48%), followed by a mix of both with a preference for e-learning. Only 15% and 11% preferred face-to-face or e-learning activities only, respectively. Despite this clear vote for face-to-face meetings in combination with e-learning resources, 66% of respondents were convinced that e-learning will gain further ground in medical education and will prevail. For 30% of the participants, there is an obligation from their employing institution to attend congresses and/or courses. For the other 70%, such obligations do not exist. 90% were convinced that e-learning events bring savings in costs and time in comparison to face-to-face meetings.

### *Conclusion and Summary:*

The outbreak of the still ongoing Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 has influenced all aspects of our private and professional lives all over the world. Based on travel restrictions, lockdowns and the cancellation of larger gatherings, face-to-face conferences, congresses and educational courses have been mainly suspended for more than a year now. This challenged the need for continuous education and professional development, and initiated a huge trend towards online education resources, mainly consisting of webinars and on-demand e-learning materials, as well as virtual live educational events. The present survey as performed by the Accreditation Council in Imaging (ACI) as the organisation responsible for accreditation of educational events in radiology (in close cooperation with the UEMS European Accreditation Council for CME (EACCME), showed a different picture: despite the clear preference of the respondents of this survey, sent to all members of the European Society of Radiology (ESR), towards face-to-face meetings, the majority are convinced that e-learning will prevail as a substantial part of educational and professional development in the future for the sake of cost and time-saving. Critical aspects of the increased value of e-learning events within continuing education and professional development is the lack of human interaction, namely professional and social networking, as well as the important fact that half of the respondents do not receive any protected time to spend with e-learning materials. Without a substantial change from employers in this approach, a decrease in the total hours spent on education and continuing medical education seems to represent a realistic scenario. A similar approach to e-learning events as for face-to-face events, regarding funding and protected time, seems to be desirable. Facing the fact that human interaction cannot effectively be replaced in online interactions, the AC leadership would appreciate a healthy combination between e-learning materials and events and face-to-face meetings in the – hopefully near – post-pandemic future.

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