



Education responses to covid-19: Embracing digital learning and online collaboration

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With the spread of the covid-19, countries are implementing emergency plans to slow down and limit the spread of the virus – and prepare for a possible longer term disruption of school and university attendance. Every week of school closure will imply a massive loss in the development of human capital with significant long-term economic and social implications. While this is a strong stress test for education systems, this is also an opportunity to develop alternative education opportunities. China, which was hit first by the corona virus, is already well advanced in providing a large share of its students with access to online learning opportunities.

Developing capacity

Most emergency plans include: information and training about the virus (e.g. USA, FRA, ITA); training for teachers and school principals to work remotely (e.g. CHN, ITA, GBR); the deployment of online classes at scale (e.g. CHN); and the setting and training of task forces of counsellors and teachers to support parents and students (e.g. USA). Many responses already involve the closure of educational establishments, either nation-wide (e.g. CHN, ITA, KOR, JPN), regionally (e.g. FRA, GER, POR, ESP), or in a targeted way (e.g. USA, GBR).

Using online educational platforms while schools and universities are closed

In the context of necessary closures, different forms of online education and education resources should be mobilised. Countries should use their existing online distance courses whenever possible, encourage education technology companies to make their resources freely available, diversify the modes of delivery depending on age and capacity, and encourage teacher collaboration. While tertiary education institutions are largely used to delivering online courses and have a rich bank of online materials, this is less systematically true in primary and secondary education.

- *Use existing online distance learning platforms.* Distance online platforms may already have curriculum courses and resources in different digital format (text, video lectures, etc.), usually with a bank of related exercises. Typically teachers can select lectures and exercises their students should watch and do, and tutor them through messages and synchronous classes. Where platforms do not exist, open educational resources could be similarly used.
- *Develop new online teaching platforms (virtual classrooms).* Teachers can remotely teach their students while they are at home, using various platforms. Some “virtual classroom” services already exist within countries and have been deployed in China and Singapore at scale in the context of the corona crisis, be they public or private,
- *Partner with private educational platforms.* One difficulty with existing resources is that their massive use is not always possible simultaneously. Some private sector platforms have already made their resources and services freely available to some schools to expand countries’ response capacity (e.g. CHN, JPN).
- *Collaborate internationally to mutualise existing online educational resources.* While countries and sometimes regions within countries have different curricula, they tend to teach similar subjects and could consider translating and using foreign digital resources aligned with their curriculum.
- *Use all electronic means as appropriate.* Some older electronic means such as streaming lessons on TV is more appropriate for very young students or in some contexts where infrastructure lags behind.
- *Provide teachers with digital learning opportunities.* Countries may provide or facilitate teachers with online teacher training resources on how to teach online (e.g. ITA) but also with online collaborative platforms that allow them to share their resources and give and receive peer feedback.

Challenges of implementation

Learning and collaborating in an online environment might not come naturally to teachers and students. In considering policy responses to the school closures, policy-makers need to consider ways to:

- *Balance digital with screen-free activities.* Simply replacing the schooling hours by online lectures and discussions is likely to have a toll on students’ health. Lectures can be shortened (CHN) and combined with non-digital learning activities.
- *Keep a pulse on students’ emotional health.* The context of the virus and school closures has the potential to be unsettling and disorientating for students. Technological solutions need to find a way to provide connection, interaction, and support whilst learning is happening, particularly in a time of uncertainty.
- *Access to devices.* Students are more likely to have access to smartphones than to laptops at home, where there might be more students than devices. Governments could lend laptops or provide alternative resources (printed work booklets) (e.g. GBR, JPN).
- *Manage access to IT infrastructure.* Having all students connected at the same time may be a problem in some places, and access to IT infrastructure should also be monitored to provide good access to all, perhaps within certain time frames.

Longer term opportunities

The current wave of school closures offers an opportunity for experimentation and for envisioning new models of education and new ways of using the face-to-face learning time.

- *Explore secure systems for taking exam from home.* One likely disruption will be for high stake exams (university entrance exams, etc.), which often require no access to resources and strict identification of the exam taker. Some solutions have been developed for identifying exam takers, but the exam format may remain a problem.
- *Explore different time and schooling models.* The need to explore how students can learn in different places and at different times will help countries better understand the potential of digital learning solutions and bring communities, homes, and schools closer together. Students are used to a busy school timetable and workload, but new solutions may be explored to provide students with opportunities to have more agency by being given more autonomy. This should be balanced with appropriate guidance to keep them engaged.
- *Empower teachers to make the most of digital advances.* Teachers will have the opportunity to test out different digital learning solutions, and understand how technology can be used to foster deeper student learning. They need to be encouraged to think creatively about their role as facilitators of student learning, and how technology can support them in doing so, and how they can combine their expertise as a profession.
- *Use the variations within and across countries to learn.* While the crisis pushes learning, research and evaluation to the background, the different solutions implemented within countries and their effects should be carefully documented as many ideas of implementation and lessons about their effectiveness could be then be shared and analysed internationally.

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