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REMOTE EDUCATION RESPONSES TO COVID-19 IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

Document review

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Remote Education Responses to COVID-19 in the Indo-Pacific Region. Document review.

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OVERVIEW

Many countries have shifted to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, much of the existing research focuses on fully online learning in high income contexts, with very few studies considering the mechanisms that support remote learning in low- and middle-income countries. A document review of the grey literature provides some insights into the ways that countries outside the OECD are ensuring continuity in the supply of education services.

The review reveals a diversity of mechanisms have been used to provide educational access. In some contexts, existing online content has been provided free, while others have offered interactive online classes, where teachers are required to prepare content. Traditional TV or radio broadcasting is also being utilised to ensure learning continues, especially for vulnerable children or those who do not have access to resources.

Many countries also appear to be combining different methods of remote learning – in most cases, this relates to a combination of TV streaming services, internet applications, mobile broadcasting, and other internet-based technologies. Despite disparities in ownership, television is the main channel used by governments to deliver remote learning, with three in four governments (out of 127 reporting countries) using television as a provision for continued access to education for the majority of their student population.

More than 90 per cent of countries in Europe and Central Asia use television as a means of delivering remote learning, and 100 per cent of countries in South Asia. In Latin America and the Caribbean, 77 per cent of countries are delivering education programs through national TV channels. Almost 50 per cent of South Asian countries rely on mobile technology.

In the Indo-Pacific region, a number of innovations and approaches to support continuity of learning have been observed, as noted in the examples below:

- **Cambodia** has been using streaming through **a collaborative partnership with Japan** in the form of Think Think! (an educational program that provides free online lessons).
- In **Indonesia**, the Ministry of Education and Culture announced the **cancellation of the national exams** due to the COVID-19 pandemic and clarified that this would not affect graduation or enrolment at junior school, high school or tertiary education.
- **Malaysia** has utilised **streaming** on channel [TV Okey](#) to deliver educational television programs to all students, especially those without internet access. [EduwebTV](#) (previously called TV Pendidikan), the online learning platform of the Ministry of Education, also hosts **on-demand content** for students across Pre-Kindergarten to secondary school, as well as digital textbooks.
- In **Vietnam**, **live streaming** has occurred on social media platforms such as Facebook, and private schools have attempted to use fully online learning. Vietnam Posts and Telecommunications Group opened its vnEdu Teacher and vnEdu Connect applications, which support teachers to give homework remotely and assess student learning.

- **Lao PDR** also utilised an **educational TV channel** to support continuity of learning. The Research Institute for Education Science under the Lao Ministry of Education and Sports is currently involved in research to broadcast reruns to support ongoing remote schooling.
- In **Timor-Leste**, an expansion of the Eskola Ba Uma (“School goes home”) initiative launched by the Ministry of Education, relies on a blended **open, distance and flexible learning approach** using different technologies.
- **Timor-Leste** is also trialling an online learning platform called Learning Passport developed by UNICEF in partnership with Microsoft and the University of Cambridge. Learning Passport offers a virtual library with curriculum-based textbooks and supporting materials, including songs and videos. **Teachers will receive training on how to support learning outside the classroom and on teaching through the online platforms.**

In the Pacific, information and communications technology (ICT) mechanisms have been discussed alongside community partnership models that encourage collaborative practice. Some highlights in responses to COVID-19 include:

- **Fiji** has initiated supplementary radio programs for out-of-school students. These education radio programs will be delivered through the Schools Broadcasting Unit and the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation. Fiji has high access to ICT and to support access to technology, the government has put a levy on telecommunications providers, **leveraging existing domestic resources** to increase access to technology, and the quality of education.
- **Samoa** has increased access to digital learning resources by encouraging students to **bring their own devices to school**.
- In the **Federated States of Micronesia**, **community-based learning** and remote learning frameworks are still being developed.
- In **Kiribati**, funding has been used to finalise an **education contingency plan**, noting that in some of the most deprived areas, less than 10 per cent of communities have electricity and this is a major barrier to remote schooling. The focus is on strengthening existing education mechanisms.
- **The Solomon Islands** has limited access to ICT. **Pooling resources** has helped it reduce costs by leveraging greater economies of scale to provide domestic capacity.

CHALLENGES WITH REMOTE EDUCATION

While the grey literature points out innovations in educational technology, it also highlights concerns around the use of ICT mechanisms by teachers, in relation to resourcing and training. This includes the need to enhance provision of educational technology mechanisms, better teacher training and support for parents.

The review of documents also acknowledges that countries need to manage their expectations of what can be done during periods of remote schooling by identifying the key constraints to

educating learners remotely. Large investments in educational technology for example, will deliver few results if not based on assessment and understanding of systemic limitations.

In relation to student populations, monitoring vulnerable students are also referred to in the grey literature, with an emphasis on student safety and supporting girls. Research from previous disasters and emergencies demonstrates that girls and women are often adversely impacted, and the grey literature emphasises the need to focus on the education of girls now and beyond the pandemic.

Finally, school-based case studies highlight an emergent focus on student voice in high performing education systems, where student perceptions of remote schooling surveys have been conducted in response to lockdown measures. A focus on student wellbeing and mental health was particularly prominent in the grey literature from Australia and the United Kingdom.

OPPORTUNITIES TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE REMOTE EDUCATION

The grey literature often highlights the notion of ‘building back better’ by improving access to learning, where educational technology features heavily. While research on the impact of remote learning responses during the COVID-19 pandemic are emerging, the documents reviewed provide insights into opportunities in schooling. Accordingly, this review has identified a number of recommendations for building sustainable responses to COVID-19 in the short and medium term.

ENSURE CONTINUITY OF LEARNING

In regards to immediate response measures, countries should consider the repercussions of COVID-19 on learning losses and economic impacts. Recommendations based on the document review are outlined below.

Recommendations for education systems

- Provide continuity in the supply of learning during COVID-19 crisis, or catch-up solutions, especially for students in low-income contexts, who are at risk of dropping out
- Improve engagement in online education for students at risk of dropping out through the provision of digital devices to stay safe and engaged
- Support the engagement of girls as a priority
- Focus on children with special education needs – the most vulnerable children need to have viable options for education during lockdowns
- Prepare teachers to respond to learning losses when schools reopen, using differentiated teaching approaches that focus on literacy and numeracy
- Provide teachers with support on remote learning and IT equipment use

- Create ways for students to learn at home through interactive apps, live television broadcasts, online classrooms and teleconferences
- Develop systems to support student safety – including physical and mental health – build connections and foster wellbeing
- Strengthen learning support when schools reopen using tutoring or other types of remedial support
- Facilitate cross-border collaboration to ensure that resources are available for countries with less resources
- Create opportunities for cross-country collaboration, such as exchanges of content between teachers and use of learning items
- Provide food delivery (or food stamps/vouchers) and critical supplies, especially to low-income families
- Provide psychological support to students and teachers. Coaching/counselling and other incentives could also be provided to retain teachers in the profession if they experience disengagement during COVID-19.

Recommendations for schools and teachers

- Ensure continuity of learning by using remote learning mechanisms to mitigate learning loss and maintain student engagement
- Identify teachers who can use remote learning and educational technologies, and encourage them to become mentors and coaches within schools
- Identify students in need of support either through a test/assessment or information provided by teachers
- Use early warning signals such as absenteeism, delays in turning in assignments, as well as lack of motivation or distraction in classrooms to identify student learning needs.
- Focus on supporting students with special educational needs and disabilities
- Pay attention to the engagement and safety of female students
- Consider ways to support the most vulnerable students
- Adapt assessment procedures, such as using average final grades or student portfolios instead of high stakes assessments
- Assess the learning gap produced or exacerbated during school closure periods as schools reopen, but focus on wellbeing first
- Utilise remedial lessons, tutoring, coaching, and other necessary interventions. The programs should also focus on at-risk populations.

STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING RESILIENT EDUCATION SYSTEMS

SUSTAIN BLENDED LEARNING

As schools reopen, it is important to extend the remote learning capabilities of staff, schools, and systems. Remote learning could become a common modality for many learners and it is important for short to medium-term solutions to focus on ways to sustain blended learning mechanisms, as outlined below:

- Upgrade ICT education infrastructure through solutions provided by public-private partnerships, including governments, education professionals, NGOs, technology providers, and telecom network operators
- Analyse and evaluate new digital infrastructure and educational technologies
- Invest in vulnerable children through the targeted provision of ICT equipment to decrease the digital divide between wealthy and poor
- Prepare schools to switch between face-to-face and remote learning as needed
- Increase capabilities of remote learning at scale and digitalise education (where resources exist)
- Enhance the efficacy of TV streaming and radio broadcasting services in case they need to be implemented at the national level again
- Develop content and establish quality assurance mechanisms
- Build teacher capabilities in blended learning through teacher training (using public interventions, as well as public-private partnerships)
- Implement resource sharing libraries for younger children, such as toy libraries for learning through play interventions
- Provide specially targeted programs to support students who have dropped out.

MAINTAIN FUNDING TO SUPPORT VULNERABLE STUDENTS

In the medium to long-term, it is crucial that systems focus on mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable students through monitoring and evaluation, as outlined below:

- Countries should maintain education budgets focused on mitigating disadvantage, so as to prevent further increases in inequality
- In addition to the expenditure allocated for teachers and recurrent costs, funds should be set aside for investments in innovation, school safety, and quality education infrastructure focused on student vulnerability
- Measure efficiency in the education system and increase the quality of data monitoring
- Increase accountability for results at the school level and further monitoring and evaluation using Education Management Information Systems (EMIS)
- Strengthen EMIS to capture the possible outbreaks in schools, track vulnerable students and distribute emergency funding.

PREPARING FOR SCHOOLS TO RE-OPEN

As education systems start to re-open, it is important to consider a range of interventions to manage further outbreaks, as well as the teaching and learning needs arising from school closures. Research shows that extended shutdowns increase the risk of students not returning to school, particularly for the most vulnerable students who may not have access to continuous learning or those who seek alternative income-generating activities. Therefore, strategies to support schools re-opening should consider minimising the drop-out rate, while also maintaining student engagement. Other measures critical to maintaining education resilience during the re-opening phase are outlined below:

- Provide ongoing support for teachers in blended learning modalities, including continued online learning, TV/radio programs and take-home packs to complement face-to-face learning
- Conduct diagnostic assessment of student learning to identify needs due to losses in instructional time and to manage learning issues
- Explore opportunities to institutionalise blended learning frameworks to build education resilience
- Promote shared best practices and resources between teachers and schools
- Prioritise student engagement and wellbeing.

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