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Impact and Implications of the COVID 19-Crisis on Educational Systems and Households

TUAC Secretariat Briefing

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Executive summary

Lockdown and social distancing measures due to the Covid-19 epidemic has led to closures of care, school, training and higher education facilities in most OECD countries. At the time of writing, this concerns more than 1,576,021,818 students in 188 countries. This briefing explores the effects these measures have on educational systems, with a view on how negative impacts on learning can be mitigated, especially for vulnerable groups. Based on three scenarios, conclusions are drawn for the short-, the mid- and the long-term. The following findings illustrate the need for tailored policies that look at the delivery of learning (including resolving connectivity issues), the well-being of students and the challenges faced by households depending on their employment status (during confinement), income and demographics (e.g. single parents, migrants):

- Students' emotional well-being and health are priorities.

- Aiming to replace teaching by eLearning is too easy. Remote learning demands appropriate hardware, software, and a high-speed internet connection. Beyond digital literacy challenges, teachers and student need to find new ways to communicate and use learning tools effectively. Offline learning material and special programmes for vulnerable students deserve consideration.
- Assistance structures for students from vulnerable groups have to be put in place immediately (e.g. helplines, online coaching, partial school re-openings for those lacking digital infrastructure, summer-school programmes) and individual support for students in need should continue throughout the coming school year.
- Assessment of learning could focus on overall performance. Options around postponing, adopting or putting off (final) exams are important to secure fair outcomes for future educational and employment pathways.
- Households with caring responsibilities are under severe pressure by containment measures. Workers need the right and financial compensation for extraordinary and prolonged full- or part-time leaves for care responsibilities. Essential workers need to be able to profit from partial care facilities and school openings, as well as lump sums for babysitters or tutors.

The impact of confinement measures on school systems

The current health crises is having a vast impact on students and youth globally. Confinement and social-distancing measures change learning. School closures are enacted in most countries. This briefing covers the impact of the COVID 19-crisis responses on Educational Systems and households with a particular regard to disadvantaged students and lower-income families. Three possible future scenarios for the ongoing school year are drawn and from there, the implications on learning during and after the crisis are discussed. TUAC suggests a bundle of measures that should be taken to mitigate negative effects for students and enhance equity in education. Finally, policy solutions for workers with caring responsibilities and take-aways for collective bargaining are outlined.

According to UNESCO dataⁱ as of the time of writing, confinement measures result in:

- **1,576,021,818 affected learners**
- **91.3% of total enrolled learners**
- **188 country-wide closures**

Educational systems are heavily affected by measures taken against the spread of the COVID 19-virus. In March 2020, several countries announced school closures under diverse settings (concerning target areas, length, reach) in order to allow the curve to flatten. During this time, teachers and education professionals have been asked to supply students with teaching material and instruct students directly via remote digital tools. The expectation is that most students learn from home under the supervision of their parents. This is referred to as “home-schooling” in the media. In reality, the arrangement comes closer to remote learning or distance learning in that teachers and schools still remain responsible for the learning content and outcome. Moreover, some countries have already postponed, adopted or put off the final exams for students in late spring/ early summer. In some countries, schools stay partly open for parents working in essential sectors.

Students face extremely different learning circumstances: their parents may be at work or at home; they may telework or be out of their jobs (temporarily or be laid-off). This is to say that learning conditions are linked to labour market conditions along occupational groups and contract types. Access to digital learning varies on available equipment and connectivityⁱⁱ. As such, some students may share their learning resources and space with other members of the household. All of the above, points to significant gaps in broadband coverage, housing challenges and inequalities adjacent to socio-economic background. As the OECD points out, “*important factors include home educational resources, availability of space, parental level education, parents’ fluency in language of school instruction, and parents’ digital competencies, but also parents’ engagement with schools. In general, children from low socio-economic households are at a disadvantage for continuing their study and learning at home.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

In one of its briefings on the crisis, the OECD confirms the link between the loss in income and demographics: *“young people, people educated below tertiary level, and for couples with children, who are also among those who have to deal with school closures and new care responsibilities. Single parent families (especially those headed by women), may also face compounding challenges from a loss of income, difficulties with childcare, and a lack of family support”*^{iv}.

Another dimension is that the number of women is not only disproportionately higher in essential sectors, but also *“much of women’s unpaid work time is spent on child care. School closure and home confinement are likely to increase unpaid work time”*

Three scenarios for the rest of the school year

With the above in mind – the impact on children’s well-being and learning outcomes, as well as the strain on households, the following scenarios could emerge after the initial lock-down period until mid-April 2020:

1. **Schools reopen in late April/ beginning of May 2020:** Children will then have lost up to a month of regular teaching, final exams might still take place (if not already cancelled or replaced by alternative methods), teaching and learning reverts back to normal.
This scenario is not very likely as Data from Hubei (China) suggest that containment policies are effective in suppressing the epidemic in the short-term, but the lasting effects are still unclear.^v
2. **Schools partly reopen for some target groups:** Specific household and student groups are given the opportunity to profit from a partial school re-opening. This could concern those who take final exams (A-Levels), students belonging to risk groups, students with special needs and students of parents working in essential sectors. The vast majority of students stay at home and continues distance learning.
3. **Social distancing and lock down-measures are prolonged until mid-June/mid-July:** Students miss (nearly) a full semester of in-school learning. In some countries, summer holidays have already started and students return only in autumn after ~5 months without classroom instruction, which may cause learning losses especially for vulnerable groups.

Expected implications of distance learning during crises

In the immediate term, as the OECD confirms, *“children are less physically active, spend much longer on-screen time, experience more irregular sleep patterns, and follow less healthy diets”*^{vi}. Apart from this, no major impact on learning outcomes and career paths should materialise for scenario 1. However, scenario 2 and 3 might have **severe impacts, especially for already disadvantaged students**. The following impacts are very likely:

- **Emotional well-being** is likely to be affected by the ongoing health crisis. In turn, this affects how students learn. Anxiety complicates focussing and attention capacity^{vii}.

(Emotional) well-being hence is a priority during the COVID-19 crisis as students are confronted with exceptional uncertainty. *“A protracted pandemic, and its multiple effects on health, income and well-being of individuals and communities, is likely to strain the psychological reserves of all, including students and teachers”^{viii}*. An additional aggravating factor will be the estimated rise in **domestic violence** during the period of lock-downs. *“A key priority of education institutions should be the well-being of students and staff. Maintaining effective social relationships between learners and educators will contribute to that goal.”^{ix}*

- School closures bring **difficulties for students of disadvantaged groups**. The gap in competences might widen as they typically do not have the same learning conditions and support. The longer the remote learning goes on, the less they can keep up. Students from families with migrant backgrounds (other native language than the language of instruction), students from families with lower educational attainment levels, children in a setting with poor learning stimulation, and others in vulnerable positions might suffer most from the current situation.
- **Students without or with limited digital infrastructure remain “off-line”**. Access to PCs/notebooks/tablets/mobile gadgets, to high broadband and printing facilities is intrinsic to successful remote learning. Such conditions are not guaranteed for all students in affected countries, especially across regions, households and the developing world.
- **Younger children may be hit harder** than older ones as their dependence on parents is higher. They need coaching in their learning process, plus access and help with mastering digital devices.
- **Children of working parents need support and guidance for learning**, but this could not be guaranteed for all students straight after the outbreak of the crisis. Working conditions of parents vary and teachers and schools often lack digital equipment as well. The closure of schools and child-care facilities puts households under pressure. Parents struggle to fulfil telework while assisting their children with their learning activities at the same time. This is even more problematic for parents working in essential services. Educational systems ideally have to jump in and find alternative ways to support students^x.
- **Remote learning is about digital protection and literacy**. When heavily relying on digital tools in learning, additional requirements have to be met. Remote learning demands^{xi} appropriate software (eLearning-platforms, video-conference tools, learning applications), copyright for learning contents, know-how of eLearning by teachers and students, and communication between teachers and learners. With that **digital security, data privacy and protection risks arise**. Protecting students’ and teachers’ personal information and data becomes crucial^{xii}.

The same applies to digital risks around protecting children online. Another layer to this is preventing the spread of fake news online.

Certainly, there was little to no time to adapt learning methods, prepare teachers and place effective social protections, safeguards and direct support measures to low-income households when fully jumping into remote learning. Thus, a lot of students and schools/teachers are not prepared and eLearning systems might not be available or fully developed. In the case of ongoing remote learning, a key question arises: **Will really no child be left behind?**

Short-, mid- and long-term measures will be needed to ensure that the impact of the current and possibly prolonged lock-down period is not too severe on learning outcomes and the well-being of students and parents, and household incomes. At this point, finding policy solutions under **social dialogue^{xiii} is crucial for a well-balanced bundle of policies, which considers the interests of the many.** When designing measures to mitigate the crisis, teaching professionals have to be consulted. Hence, teachers and public sector unions play an important role in informing and supporting educators and care professionals^{xiv}.

Suggested short-term measures for scenario 2 + 3

In ensuring appropriate learning environments with equal chances for all, the following measures appear essential:

- ***All students and teachers must have adequate hardware/software/internet access.*** If this is not possible, alternative methods of remote learning can be considered. For example, Pakistan^{xv} is using radio broadcasting. Over three months, children can now follow their educational process from home through the radio programme, “Broad Class – Listen to Learn”.
- ***Further education and coaching on eLearning for teachers*** is needed (also via remote methods). TALIS 2018^{xvi} shows that teachers use technology as a means of teaching more often when it was included in their formal training. Those who missed out on such training need to receive support.
- For remote learning, it is desirable to move on ***from one-way communication to more interaction. Every student needs a personal contact.*** Teachers may need technical support to be able to fulfil their task as coaches.
- ***Assistance structures for students from vulnerable groups*** have to be put in place (e.g. helplines, online coaching, online teaching-sequences). If digital infrastructure is not accessible (or insufficient) and cannot be put in place, containment policies might be relaxed for a small number of students for few hours per week, as far as health protection for students and teachers can be ensured.

- ***Schools could be partly opened as hubs***, for students without sufficient learning resources at home and for risk groups. Again, health protection must be ensured.
- ***Low-income households need to get direct financial support or technical assistance to facilitate remote learning.*** Other measures taken such as the extension of short-term unemployment benefits, lump sums and paid leave due to care responsibilities need to be adjusted to the needs of these households.
- ***Assessments of learning via overall performance throughout the year rather than annual exams:*** Where exams can be held, it might still be fair to weigh the overall performance more than testing results, as the remote preparation for exams might not be comparable to the usual learning arrangements.
- ***Final exams should always take place under fair conditions***, i.e. after having provided proper preparation for all students at the same scale. If this is not the case, which is likely under the current circumstances, ***postponing, adopting or putting them off might lead to fairer outcomes in regard to educational and employment transitions.*** The execution of exams can be altered: reducing the exam content, skipping pre-tests, allowing for partial tests or oral presentations/exams. Final exams could also be replaced via an assessment of previous efforts, which would be exceptionally valid for admission to upper secondary and tertiary education. The UK cancelled all GCSEs, AS and A-levels exams: on 30 March, the government^{xvii} announced the cancellation of all exams for summer 2020, as schools are partly closed and need to focus on supporting vulnerable children and children of essential workers. Grades will be calculated on the basis of previous submissions. In cases where students feel underrated, they can still do an exam when schools and colleges reopen.
- ***Deadlines and tests for admission to upper secondary and tertiary education need adjustment.***
- To support students and their families, expanding ***entitlements for financial aid*** is paramount with adequate time horizons, clear eligibility criteria and simplified accessibility parameters. If levied, ***a reduction or suspension of tuition fees for lower-income households*** is desirable during the time of the crises.

Required mid-term measures for scenarios 2 + 3

Measures for the time after the immediate emergency period and confinement could include:

- ***Re-arranging curricula***, shifting essential content to the following school year, stretching the time to work on the core topics.

- Installing voluntary public **summer school programmes** (low-threshold services) and public tutoring services for the next school year.
- Implement **individualised assistance** for risk-students in schools in order to counterbalance difficulties originating from school closures.

Long-term opportunities for scenario 2 + 3

Despite the severe situation we are in today, lessons from the crisis can be drawn to enhance equity in education:

- Developing a general roll-out in student-centred learning and individual assistance
- Strengthening student-support systems
- Rethinking copyright parameters on learning content: Regulations on copyright could eventually be loosened for educational use. Learning content which is financed through public spending should be defined as Open Education Resources (OER)^{xviii}
- Systematically building up learning content and structures for eLearning and student-centred learning.

The pressure on households with caring responsibilities

While school closures can reduce the reproduction number of Covid-19 illness by 7-15%^{xix}, it also brings significant economic and social effects. *“Evidence shows that 16-45% of parents would need to take leave to supervise children at home; 16-18% of parents would lose income, and about 20% of households would have difficulty arranging childcare.”* OECD points out. This puts households with caring responsibilities for children under pressure.

Policies for workers with caring responsibilities and items for collective bargaining

During the Covid-19 crisis, some workers are requested to work from home or are put on short-term work, temporary unemployment schemes or are being laid-off in non-essential sectors. In essential sectors, workers see their working time intensify.

These different circumstances all display great challenges that households face, in particular those with single parents or those in which job security is shattered. In addition, where it is possible, *“teleworking full office hours can be very difficult if not impossible in practice, notably for families with young children, couples where only one partner can telework and single parents.”*^{xx} Workers need possibilities to request a temporary shift in working hours and work load. There still needs to be public care facilities for essential workers or lump sums given for babysitters.

- Working parents need the right to request (temporary) leave from work. Statutory annual leave should not remain at the discretion of the employer. Regulations in collective bargaining are mandatory, especially when statutory entitlements to

paid leaves do not exist. Workers in the US, for example, are not entitled to any paid annual leave by national law.

- Employees need clear **rights to take additional time off in case of school or child-care facility closures**. Some countries permit parents to leave their workplace if they need to care for their ill or injured children. Sometimes parents may “*leave for unforeseen closures (e.g. Poland and Slovak Republic) or other ‘unforeseen emergencies’ (e.g. Australia and the UK)*”^{xxi}. Still, this leave is often unpaid or time-limited. Many families might be unable to finance unpaid leave over a longer period of closures. Taking in mind gender pay-gaps, women might be much more affected if decisions on unpaid leave have to be taken by families. **Families need financial compensation for work leave for child-care during exceptional circumstances** like the Covid-19 crisis. Japan^{xxii}, for instance, introduced financial support to employers who let their employees take additional paid leave during Covid-19-measures. Certainly, an individual’s right to take paid leave would help workers the most.
- Parents working in essential services need **alternative care arrangements**. For example, Austria, France, Germany and the Netherlands^{xxiii} will re-open facilities, with reduced staff, for children of workers in health and social care and teaching.
- Over all, **health protection of workers** in their workplaces is absolutely mandatory. This especially applies during the pandemic crisis for all essential services, including schools and child-care facilities.

The current crisis clearly shows, that through collective bargaining, working parents need to be sheltered against unforeseen health risks and financial constraints. Parents should not have to carry the negative consequences of the emergency lock-downs on their own.

ⁱ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

ⁱⁱ PISA 2015 data shows that around one in four 15-year olds from low socio-economic households do not have a quiet space to study at home, and one in five do not have access to computer for school work nor an internet connection. PISA 2018 highlights large gaps between countries on these fronts; around one in four children in Mexico do not have access to a quiet space to study, whereas as few as one in twenty children in Austria, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and Portugal face this problem. (OECD (2020). Covid-19: Protecting People and Societies, p. 20)

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.oecd.org/social/family/child-well-being/>

^{iv} OECD (2020). Covid-19: Protecting People and Societies, [https://read.oecd-](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=126_126985-nv145m3l96&title=COVID-19-Protecting-people-and-societies)

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