

# COVID-19 Education Response Webinar

## Ensuring Equity in Remote Learning Responses to School Closures

Friday 20 March 2020

### SYNTHESIS REPORT

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#### *Context*

The COVID-19 pandemic and the pace with which it is spreading is a global challenge requiring collective action and solidarity. This is as true for the health sector, as it is for education. At the time of the webinar, almost 1 billion children and youth were affected by [school closures](#) as part of measures to contain the spread of COVID-19. In response, Ministries of Education around the world have been deploying a wide mix of approaches to address education disruption and foster quality distance learning with a concern to ensure equity and inclusion, and leave no one behind.

#### *Objective and guiding questions*

The webinar aimed to share experiences on the way in which governments are accounting for equity in deploying distance learning strategies in response to the closure of schools. The following questions guided the exchange:

- What steps are countries taking to ensure that distance learning solutions leave no one behind?
- How are education authorities accounting for gaps in device and connectivity access when country rolling out digital learning resources?
- How are digital learning and access to mass media combined to reach out to under privileged learners?
- How are teaching staff mobilized to address equity challenges?

## *Covid-19: What is known and what is not*

The World Health Organization (WHO) provided an overview of what is known and not known about the coronavirus. As the new virus is easily transmittable by droplets from infected people, hand-washing, respiratory hygiene and social distancing are key principles to avoid the spread of the disease. Children appear to experience less serious symptoms and fatality. That said, they can still be infected and infect others. Only 20 percent of patients will require any type of hospitalization, and of which 5 percent will require serious treatment. However, it is important to give health workers time to deal with this, to get the equipment, to train staff, etc. Worldwide, there is limited capacity to take care of serious cases. We must give medical staff the equipment needed to protect themselves and their patients. However, at present it is not known how long COVID-19 will circulate, how long stay-at-home measures will be maintained, how many people are currently infected, how far the virus will spread and whether the virus will mutate again. There is nevertheless great potential for research and there is excellent international scientific cooperation at this time.

## *Education responses to the pandemic*

According to the WHO, education responses could include:

- Drawing from approaches to refugee/migrant/crisis-affected populations.
- Engaging with health authorities to identify community needs (e.g. children who get their only daily meal at school, options to support essential workers balancing child care needs)
- Repurposing public health information as learning opportunities.
- Helping parents to balance time through targeted delivery of learning, entertainment and exercise.
- Partnering with private industry to deliver physical and virtual learning material for low-resource settings.

A great variety of resources is available online, such as [UNICEF, WHO, IFRC, guidance on COVID-19 for schools](#), including other resources on psychosocial health support, health education advice, educational materials, and messages that are valuable at the community level. WHO has launched a WhatsApp service where people can text and receive information on various areas such as the spread of COVID-19, how to protect yourself, travel advice, myth busters and news<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Ms Catherine Kane (WHO), Human Resources for Health Policies & Standards, Health Workforce Department, World Health Organization.

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## *Commonalities in national strategies for equitable distance learning*

In responding to the educational disruption caused by school closures, the authorities have deployed distance learning strategies to ensure continuity of learning, whilst maintaining a focus on equity and inclusion. There are some commonalities in the challenges encountered and the approaches adopted in different countries.

- **Need for a mix of technologies:** Deploying a combination of distance learning information and communication technologies, including on-line platforms and resources, emails, instant messaging, TV, as well as radio. Due to inequalities in the capacity of online platforms, levels of access to digital devices, and connectivity, TV and radio are widely being used.
- **Maintaining and supporting the learning community:** Facilitating the sense of community is a starting point. A mix of on-line and traditional technologies aims to maintain educational continuity and to support the learning community of teachers, learners and their families. This also implies redefining and reconceptualising what learning communities are about.
- **Availability of learning resources:** Making learning resources, whether local or national, or school level, open and widely available on digital platforms, to minimize the interruption of learning. Where possible these are aligned to the national curriculum. For equity and inclusion, efforts are being made to partner with companies to ensure stable operation of distance education platforms and, where possible, access to digital devices, Wi-fi, and zero cost data.
- **Inter-sectoral approaches and partnerships:** Developing a holistic movement for education involving the whole community and various sectors to address educational disruption. There is a need for strengthened inter-sectoral approaches and partnerships, between different ministerial departments, municipalities, schools, universities and service providers, at various levels, requiring strong leadership from government and local authorities.

## *Country experiences*

### **China**

With one of the largest education systems in the world, China has focused on providing a stable communication platform and effective broadband network, cloud services, free cell phone data and other services that ensure stable operation of distance education platforms. The Ministry of Education and local educational departments have requested online educational enterprises and institutes to provide free technical services and open curriculum resources for K-12 schools, universities and the general public. The Ministry provides digital learning resources and tools suited to the age and level of learners' level and age, and has been providing support for teachers to adapt to the new teaching environment, to master

online teaching skills and improve teaching effectiveness. There are still several areas needing improvement, such as network conditions, terminal devices, platform functions and services, educational management, and ICT literacy of teachers and students.

China has combined different strategies and has been using TV to inform parents, teachers and students how to access educational content and tools online. The learning management system and telecommunication software, based on PC and mobile terminals, are widely utilized. Research has demonstrated positive outcomes of the national distance learning strategy, ensuring that learning continues at home, that quality resources are shared, that there is improved interaction online. This is relieving anxiety and supporting family-school education during school closures. The research found that most students, especially college students, actually prefer online learning. Many parents support online learning during the COVID-29 outbreak and even afterwards. Some 80% of teachers in China have indicated that they would adopt more ICT in teaching and learning beyond the current disruption<sup>2</sup>.

## France

The mission of France's national centre for distance learning (CNED) is to guarantee to everyone, regardless of their situation, the means for their academic and professional success. CNED focusses its efforts on teachers as the essential link to guarantee continuity of learning. Teachers can combine personal or resources and tools through the digital space "[My Class at Home](#)", which provides a wide range of pedagogical tools, including a resource bank of pedagogical content aligned with the national curricula for teachers to use<sup>3</sup>. Resources are also created locally by local educational authorities.

## Italy

In Italy, educational authorities have prioritized the establishment of an alliance between families, students and teachers. This hinges both on trust in the capacity of teachers to innovate, as well as on the involvement of major technology companies to support their efforts. Teachers and families can connect the online and offline offers, to reinstate a sense of community among students.

Italy is implementing a great variety of pedagogical methods using the digital space, WhatsApp and so on. Distance learning platforms include Rai Scuola, La mia Scuola differente, and Treccani Scuola. Italy is also providing public investment for delivering devices and Wi-fi and is developing research partnerships for distance learning. The Ministry of Education of Italy has

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<sup>2</sup> Mr Chaozi Lei Director-General of Department of Science and Technology, Ministry of Education, China, and Professor Ronghuai Huang.

<sup>3</sup> Mr Michel Reverchon-Billot, Inspecteur général de l'éducation nationale, Directeur-général du Centre national d'éducation à distance (CNED), Ministry of Education, France

provided 85 million Euros to enable families and students to secure digital devices to follow distance learning programmes.

There is a challenging situation regarding the quality and quantity of the distance learning systems in Italy. The greatest effort has been put on learners in secondary and tertiary education, who are best able to cope. Primary schools have much less access to online educational content. Younger children (ages 0 to 6) and children with disabilities are of particular concern, as they have much more exposure to emotional difficulties during the crisis.

Learning tools also need to provide a sense of community and humanity and we have to acknowledge the tragedy that families are currently going through. Unfortunately, distance learning is increasing the social distance between people according to income and capabilities. Italy is providing resources to help families to cope with this dramatic situation. We are emphasizing the importance of communities and how facilitating a sense of community should be the starting point of online education solutions<sup>4</sup>.

## Republic of Korea

As a result of COVID-19 a joint and holistic movement for education is being developed by the entire community. Different organizations in different sectors are moving rapidly together to provide support and a community of practice has developed swiftly.

The Korea Education & Research Information Service (KERIS) is the lead agency for minimizing the interruption of learning and it has mobilized a combination of portals and platforms:

- EDUNET T-CLEAR is an integrative portal that has provided a great variety of e-resources including Teacher-Curriculum, Learning, Evaluation and Activity Resources, since 1996.
- e-Hakseupteo: teachers can provide personalized assistance based on student outcomes
- School-on (launched 10 March 2020) for instruction and support between teachers, for teachers to share amongst fellow teachers in terms of class planning, lesson plans, ICT-based class activities, sample announcements that are distributed to parents across classroom.
- The Digital Textbook: a service aiming at providing learning textbooks suitable for self-directed learning.
- KOCW: Korean Open Courseware for university students includes free of charge content.
- Wedorang learning community: a platform for students and teachers to share advice and good practices.

The Republic of Korea strives to foster equity in terms of access to and support for learning, for example through connectivity. Students can access learning portals freely without having data

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<sup>4</sup> Prof. Alberto Melloni Advisor to Minister of Education, Italy

deducted from their personal data allowances. The Republic of Korea also uses other offline tools, such as the educational broadcasting system, the content of which is aligned to the national curriculum. Teachers and students can use TV, radio and the Internet, because learning materials and their content are consistent<sup>5</sup>.

## Rwanda

The Ministry of Education is encouraging students, teachers, parents and care-givers to use its existing online portal (<https://elearning.reb.rw>) to access teaching and learning resources in an effort to keep students learning while at home. The Ministry is creating a users' guide to help access and use online teaching and learning resources on the portal. Online portals for teaching and learning resources, however, are sometimes getting overloaded due to demand. In response, the government is partnering with the private sector, requesting Internet service providers to offer zero cost data to students. In addition to capacity of on-line platforms, digital and connectivity access inequalities remain. The government is therefore also leveraging TV and radio to provide pedagogical content. National TV is also broadcasting educational programs for children, including in the form of cartoons, and radio is also used, particularly on STEM-related content<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mr Hwansun Yoon Education Specialist, Global Cooperation Section, Korea Education & Research Information Service (KERIS), Republic of Korea.

<sup>6</sup> Ms Christine Niyizamwiyitira, Head of Department of ICT in Education, Rwanda Education Board, Rwanda.

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