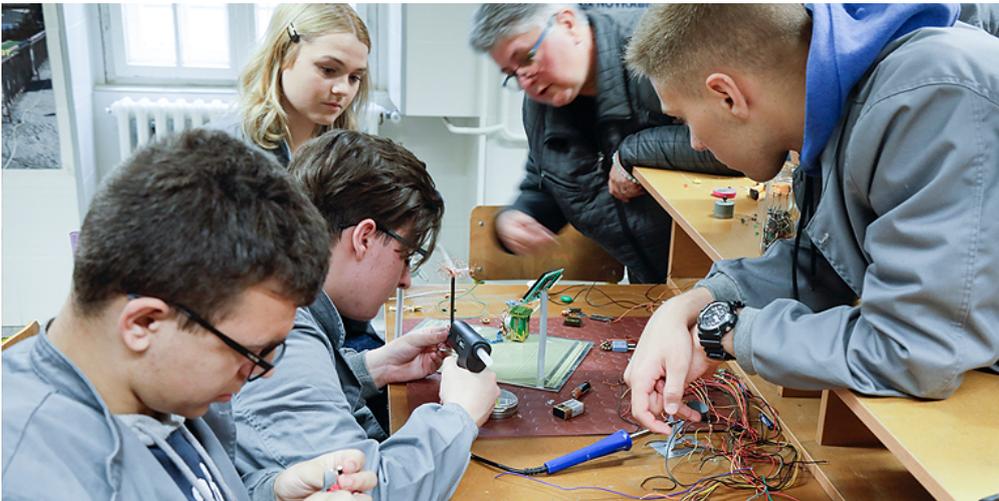INSIGHT

What Are Education and Training Systems Learning from the COVID-19 Emergency?

Countries are currently working on adjusting their education and training systems to cope with the effects of COVID-19. Photo credit: European Training Foundation.

The pandemic is having a profound impact on how learning is delivered and how it unfolds for millions of learners all over the world.

Published: 22 May 2020

Introduction

In the wake of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, most countries have gone into lockdown to slow down rates of infection: from one day to the next, countries have closed all schools and training programs. All education and training actors had to adapt to a new reality overnight.

In this article, the European Training Foundation (ETF), the European Union agency supporting 29 countries outside EU in their lifelong learning policies and education and training systems, shares insights on learning during the pandemic and pitches not for online education to be the change, but for learning to be at the center of improvements.

In order to continue providing meaningful support in these circumstances, ETF redirected its efforts toward three new modalities: (i) targeted monitoring of countries' policy response, (ii) sharing of best

practice and policy approaches, and (iii) initial assessment of how countries move from the initial response to longer-term decisions on how education could be delivered in a lockdown environment.

Analysis

Since mid-March ETF partner countries (except Belarus, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) took unprecedented decisions that have impacted the delivery of education and training services. We observed, through regular meetings with our key stakeholders and through the launch of a social media campaign, #learningconnects, that countries went through similar stages to ensure continuity of learning. The way countries reacted reminds us of the curve of change—from denial (this is not going to last long, just a few days), to shock and confusion where countries made quick decisions on how to prevent chaos in their systems, to a phase of "letting go", and eventually onto the search for ideas, solutions, and innovative practices for quick acceleration and delivery. Usually, when people get to this phase in their change curve, the next phase heralds a new beginning. Will this also happen to education and training systems?

To know the answer to this question we need to consider three facts.

First, we need to **consider how education transformed during this time** of emergency. We observed gains in terms of acceleration of training for teachers and trainers as well as for students and learners of all ages (including parents) and an acceleration of production of new learning and teaching materials, tools, and methods. We also observed gains in terms of collaboration. Private sector operators are getting involved in education not only in relation to the content of programs and certifications but also to unite forces to find solutions, build platforms, and offer connectivity and equipment to students and teachers, and even to families, to manage both educational and work-related needs.

Second, we need to **consider the challenges of unequal access and suspensions of work-based learning,** such as practice-based training, apprenticeships, and internships. This puts at risk learning outcomes for millions of learners in the world and places enormous pressure on systems to catch up. Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) will be hard to achieve in a world that moves online and makes higher use of digital and online services. All countries are confronted with unequal access to equipment and connectivity and difficulties among teachers and trainers in blending new modalities of teaching in their routine. They also face the realization that, despite almost 2 decades of an international debate on information and communication technology (ICT) in education, our learning systems are still for the most part not making the best use of what technology can offer to maximize the learning experience.

Third, we need to **consider how stakeholders have reacted** to the new environment. On one hand, we have seen many cases of the poor use of distance education, with attempts of simply transferring school-based teaching models online. While this approach can ensure some continuity for learning based on content and notion delivery, it fails in delivering on competency-based development. In many cases, the crisis has shown that in spite of growing awareness and debates on competence-based approaches, the knee-jerk reaction of most education systems is still conservative and focused on delivering lessons. On

the other hand, some countries—in particular those with some experience in piloting digital agendas—have been better at putting at the center of their approach the key challenge: how to support learners in their learning process through options available remotely, rather than focusing merely on how to deliver the teaching through other means.

Most countries have moved beyond the crisis management phase. In most cases, we can see a clear trajectory and common challenges. Countries already equipped with digital approaches reacted faster. For example, Azerbaijan, Israel, Montenegro, and Turkey, where a digital strategy and clear guidelines are already in place, could provide a basis for further action. Other countries, such as Egypt, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, or Uzbekistan, have taken advantage of school holidays to plan an organized response and ensure coverage. Generally speaking, in all countries, general education has been the first priority with classes being provided both through television and e-learning portals. Education providers are expected to organize it themselves, with resources made available centrally, including training, digital materials, and access to learning platforms. In all countries, there is an ongoing concern about the preparedness of and support for teachers and trainers, and the quality of and access to provision. Action is being taken, but these challenges remain the most important ones being faced by countries.

Four elements are important in addressing the emergency:

1. Clear indications by central authorities and a single source of information;
2. Setting up digital platforms and supporting teachers and trainers in using them, both centrally and at provider level, including peer support;
3. Cooperation with the private sector and civil society organizations to maximize the use of pilot initiatives, as well as public-private partnerships to address access to equipment and connectivity for both students and teachers; and
4. Monitoring and feedback both at provider and system level to adjust measures and inform future planning.

Implications

All countries show the need and willingness to capitalize on the efforts made as regard to teacher involvement, digital materials produced, and new teaching and learning methods. In this stage, there are three critical issues:

1. Ensuring that scenarios on future education are developed, building on lessons learned during the emergency and in particular collecting evidence in a transparent way and using it to inform policy choices and actions on future education and training;
2. Focusing on the sustainability of actions and measures adopted, including the maintenance of equipment and updating of portals and materials produced, and the continued commitment to ensuring accessibility and coverage for all students and teachers;
3. Addressing the shortcomings of education and training systems highlighted by the crisis, in particular the question of equity and access, the need to strengthen competence-based learning, and the specificity of practice-based learning.

Will COVID-19 actually be the trigger for transformation? The answer will depend on these three critical issues. Re-establishing international cooperation, including crowdsourcing, and sharing of resources could speed up and support this transformation.

The key takeaway from the remarkable reaction to the COVID-19 crisis is the realization that the transformation is not about "moving online" but about switching to lifelong learning and ensuring that learning is accessible to all. Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) are still our goals and these need to be delivered with a renewed sense of urgency.

Resources

European Training Foundation. 2020. _Coping with COVID-19: Mapping education and training responses to the health crisis in ETF partner countries._ May.

ETF. LearningConnects.

European Commission. 2020. European Vocational Skills Week: Fight Against COVID-19.

Open Space: ETF knowledge sharing platform.

Cesare Onestini
Director, European Training Foundation

Before joining the ETF, Cesare Onestini was Deputy Head of the European Union (EU) Delegation to Bhutan and India. He has worked for the European institutions on the promotion of cooperation in education and training, developed projects for intercultural education, and coordinated school partnerships and teachers' mobility across EU member states. He has also worked for the EU in external relations, international trade, security, and crisis management.