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## COMMITTEE ON CULTURE, SCIENCE, EDUCATION AND MEDIA

### The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education and culture

Rapporteur: Mr Constantinos Efstathiou, Cyprus, Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group

#### Expert report

Prepared by Ms Olena Styslavska, Teacher trainer and educational consultant in the field of Democratic Citizenship, Human Rights and Intercultural Education, Poland<sup>1</sup>

#### Quality on-line education

##### 1. Overview of emergency responses

1. The quality of online education has become an increasingly popular subject for discussion following the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. While trying to answer the question how to adapt the existing conditions for quality online education, it is necessary to have a precise understanding of what do we mean by *the existing conditions* and *quality online education*.

2. The pandemic in Europe started in March 2020 and with most governments imposing a lockdown to contain the spread of the virus, educational institutions were forced to close down and students were forced to remain at home. The educational sector of the Council of Europe member States gave a speedy response to sustain the learning process despite social distancing and closure of schools. Based on the analysis of information, available on the World Bank website,<sup>2</sup> the most common approaches, coordinated by education authorities were: shift to online education, broadcasting educational content through TV and radio stations, launch of e-learning systems and platforms, telephone helplines, publication of printed materials for learners, elaboration of guidelines for distant learning delivery and creation of repositories of e-learning resources.

3. Schools were forced to replace face-to-face compulsory instruction with online learning and home schooling, in most cases facilitated by teachers and parents. Higher education institutions organized their distance learning independently. Cloud solutions, e-learning and collaborative platforms from companies like Microsoft and Google, offered for free during the lockdown period, gained unprecedented popularity. The UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank joint database informs us that 100% of European countries have chosen online remote instructions for primary, lower secondary and upper secondary sectors and approximately 50% for the pre-primary sector. Almost 50% of the countries broadcasted educational content through the TV, while 25% of countries used radio stations broadcasting and paper-based learning.<sup>3</sup> School closures caused disruptions to the process of assessment of students and evaluation of learning outcomes. In many countries exams were postponed, in a few countries they were cancelled and in others they were replaced by continuous assessment or alternative modalities, such as online testing for final exams.<sup>4</sup>

4. There were also less common solutions, undertaken by individual countries, such as adaptation of legislation concerning assessment and grading to the context of distance learning, intensification of training and experience exchange among teachers, adaptation of online classes to learners with special needs, inclusion of learners into decision-making processes while transferring teaching and learning to distant forms,

<sup>1</sup> All opinions expressed in this text are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Council of Europe.

<sup>2</sup> Based on "How countries are using edtech (including online learning, radio, television, texting) to support access to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic" <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/edutech/brief/how-countries-are-using-edtech-to-support-remote-learning-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

<sup>3</sup> Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond, UN, August 2020.

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO COVID-19 A glance of national coping strategies on high stakes examinations and assessment.

provision of psychological support for learners and their parents, provision of free internet access or distant learning equipment to learners in a difficult financial situation.<sup>5</sup>

5. The above-mentioned situation in educational institutions in Europe is referred to as *the existing conditions* in this report, considering the fact that it is a general description and refers to main trends, which have been undergoing dynamic change since March 2020, depending on the epidemic waves, the course of vaccination and decisions of national governments. As a result of the speedy and extraordinary efforts of all school stakeholders, member States managed to provide continuity of education in this emergency situation.

6. Urgent technology integration caused by the crisis could bring long-term changes to education and contribute to its improvement and modernization. As European education systems move from an emergency situation to a sustainable response, it will be important that the lessons from this real-life experience are collected and evaluated to identify ways through which innovative teaching and learning environments can be more fully integrated into schooling. The first lesson that was learned during the lockdown is, that technology is not a substitute for the physical classroom and that direct human contact is irreplaceable in education. However, technology can greatly facilitate teaching and learning, bringing more freedom, flexibility, inclusion and accessibility.

7. This report presents general trends that need to be taken into consideration to create a framework for quality online education in the future, to help transform online education from an experimental crisis mode to stable online and hybrid learning. For this purpose, it is necessary to be clear that existing conditions are not understood as online education. They are defined as temporary emergency measures undertaken to provide students with immediate access to learning content, disrupted by a crisis. High quality online education requires a substantial amount of specific knowledge and time spent to design and develop online courses in collaboration with instructional designers, production specialists, multimedia specialists, and other qualified support personnel. The report does not focus on specific methodological and technical recommendations. It looks at another important aspect of *quality education*, which is defined and promoted by the Council of Europe and the United Nations and is intended to draw the attention of education decision makers to the need to take relevant steps to ensure that online learning technology plays a positive role for the sustainable development of our societies.

8. According to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (DG4) *quality education* includes complete free primary and secondary schooling, provides equal access to affordable vocational training, eliminates gender and wealth disparities and helps to achieve universal access to a quality higher education. The Council of Europe advocates quality education to prepare young people not only for employment, but also for their lives as active citizens in democratic societies, and to ensure their personal development and the development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base in society.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. Measures to ensure quality on-line education in the future**

9. Quality online education can be characterised as: accessible to all, inclusive, ensuring personal development, preparing for life as active citizens in democratic societies and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base. The following chapters contain observations and suggest adaptation measures for each key component of quality on-line education.

### **2.1. Accessibility**

10. The crisis brought a deeper understanding of the digital divide and related equity gaps. The majority of learners from vulnerable groups have been facing one or more of the following problems: lack of internet connection, lack of relevant learning equipment, lack of space at home for homeschooling, lack of support from parents or caregivers. Learners who have better access to the internet, stronger parental support and greater availability of learning materials have been able to benefit from digital solutions.

11. There has been a significant rise in usage of language apps, virtual tutoring, video conferencing tools and online software. Many online learning platforms owned by private companies are temporarily offering free access to their services. Some educational authorities or educational institutions are forming partnerships with business to power virtual learning. The question of future access of these solutions for public education, and the ways private companies might influence them, remain unclear.

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<sup>5</sup> Based on "How countries are using edtech (including online learning, radio, television, texting) to support access to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic".

<sup>6</sup><https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/about#:~:text=The%20Council%20of%20Europe%20advocates,a%20broad%2C%20advanced%20knowledge%20base.>

12. For quality online education in the future, education systems need to take care that technology does not further amplify existing inequalities in access to online learning. A key factor to ensure accessibility of online learning is common access to broadband internet coverage. This means the need for adequate solutions to guarantee it. Examples from members States show that there is a wide range of solutions possible, such as reduction of internet access costs for low income households, equipping learners with free sim cards, establishing public wifi hotspot areas at schools and other designated areas. The experience of some countries shows the need for the additional broadcasting of educational content through television and radio channels.

13. The second essential component is access to learning devices, such as computers, laptops and tablets. Some countries report successful use of mobile phones to help bridge the equipment divide. While availability of learning equipment for quality online education is a must, there is a wide range of possible solutions in this respect. Surcharges for equipment purchase, free distribution of equipment or lending school equipment, to name a few. Member States report that schools could be very helpful in tracking learners that need learning devices and offer their support to obtain them.

14. Access to online learning also means access to safe learning conditions, physical learning space and a conducive environment at home. Schools and social welfare centers can monitor the situation of vulnerable learners to ensure motivation, support and relevant learning conditions. Alternative open learning spaces should be available in schools, community centers, libraries and other public institutions.

15. Another important issue is the necessity of a model framework to govern equitable partnerships between business enterprises and education institutions, respectful of the public responsibility for education and data protection issues.

16. Finally, states should guarantee free access to virtual learning environments, which give access to open educational resources and facilitate remote learning. Students should have access to the software and the tools they need for learning, like simulators and virtual reality programmes. Open educational resources must be prioritized; public education cannot be dependent on digital platforms provided by private companies.<sup>7</sup>

## **2.2. Inclusion**

17. For students with a disability and additional learning needs, the move to remote learning has presented additional challenges, including various barriers to engaging with technology, reduced access to educational support, individualized learning interventions, and the loss of social connections. Materials that were developed for online knowledge delivery were not fully available in the accessible formats required for persons with visual, hearing, intellectual and learning disabilities.

18. While there is plenty of educational material available in most spoken languages, not much can be found in regional or minority languages, needed to secure language rights and to contribute to social cohesion. Although remote e-learning brings a lot of benefits for meeting the particular needs of learners, one of its main disadvantages is that it can also reinforce stereotypes.

19. To guarantee quality online education in the future, the provision of education for students with special needs should be reassessed and reviewed. Attention should be paid to making ICT applications and distance learning available and accessible to learners with varied disabilities. This includes assistive technologies which can improve communication, allow mobility and increase participation. Edtech can be an indispensable tool to assist and empower learners with disabilities and improve their social and economic integration in society by enlarging the range of activities available to them.

20. Special attention should be paid to the right of learners from language minority groups to learn in their own language, especially in primary education. It is necessary to develop mechanisms that will ensure that quality online education eliminates gender, ethnicity, culture, age and other stereotypes.

## **2.3. Personal development**

21. In the remote learning situation, more attention has been given to ensuring the continuity of academic learning than to the socio-emotional development of students.<sup>8</sup> Schools are much more than places where

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<sup>7</sup> Education in a post-COVID world: nine ideas for public education. International Commission of the Future of Education. UNESCO, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> The educational response to the COVID crisis. Political declaration. Informal Conference of Education organised under the Greek Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, 29 October 2020.

knowledge is transferred. They help learners to develop and manage their physical and emotional well-being and build relationships with others. The absence of socialization and the personal development aspects of education has been a real and essential cost of the pandemic. The physical health of learners has also been negatively affected by the extended use of digital devices for education. These factors, combined with enforced loneliness of learners and the ambiguity of their situation, have posed challenges to their mental health and well-being.<sup>9</sup>

22. Although online learning is commonly associated with individualization of learning, quality online education needs to recognise collaborative group work as a powerful tool to help change behaviours and get better results. Sharing of experiences, giving feedback and working to a common plan increases motivation, leads to richer and longer-lasting outcomes, supports higher levels and creative forms of thinking and equips learners with relevant social and emotional skills.

23. Education systems and institutions can combine different models of delivery ranging from classroom teaching, through working in smaller groups, to making use of quality online and blended learning resources and possibilities, and further develop the role that schools play in developing students social competences.<sup>10</sup> Online educational programmes that are designed following a hybrid approach, e.g. initiating learning online asynchronously, followed by real life implementation and concluded by experience exchange, reflection and drawing conclusions in an on-line synchronous mode, seem to be the most beneficial for both – acquisition of knowledge and the personal development of learners.

#### **2.4. Preparation for life as active citizens**

24. There is considerable danger that the restriction of learning to curricular basics that happened with the closure of schools will limit the broad humanistic dimension of education that is of such importance for peace, democracy and intercultural understanding. With the main focus on academic learning, there was a definite decrease in opportunities for students to participate in decision-making processes in their schools, contribute to their communities, express their opinions and develop their competences for democratic culture. Children's and young people's rights of participation have been massively affected.

25. Young people losing faith in democracy is a particularly alarming trend. It is a trend to which no response can be found without education.<sup>11</sup> To give an example, the Council of Europe has developed innovative education materials to help teachers and learners discuss important issues arising out of the current health emergency, which are flexible and easy to use. They can be taught in a variety of distance-learning situations and adjusted to suit available e-learning platforms or devices, age of learners, local context, time on-line and level of digital skills.<sup>12</sup>

26. The emphasis on digital educational culture of high quality should evolve beyond technical skills, curriculum content and the numerical assessment of progress. It should integrate themes and problems that allow young people to learn in peace and be able to participate in social and political life. Learners need to be educated in such aspects of the digital environment as: access and inclusion, learning and creativity, media and information literacy, ethics and empathy, health and well-being, e-presence and communications, active participation, rights and responsibilities, privacy and security and consumer awareness.

27. Educational systems of member states might benefit from the Council of Europe project on digital citizenship education<sup>13</sup>, that provides an example of innovative approach to online learning building on the tried and tested principles of education for democratic citizenship and human rights, such as dialogue, critical thinking, active, social and cooperative learning.

#### **2.5 Maintenance of broad, advanced knowledge base**

28. Although online learning can be more effective, not all students have been able to engage consistently with their education as provided by the emergency strategies. It is estimated that just about half of the students were able to access all or most of the curriculum.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Education in a post-COVID world: nine ideas for public education. International Commission of the Future of Education. UNESCO, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> The educational response to the COVID crisis. Political declaration. Informal Conference of Education organized under the Greek Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, 29 October 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Making the right to education a reality in times of COVID-19. A Roadmap for Action on the Council of Europe Response to COVID-19, Council of Europe, October 2020.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/new-materials>.

<sup>13</sup> Digital Citizenship Education website <https://www.coe.int/en/web/digital-citizenship-education/home>.

<sup>14</sup> Schooling disrupted, schooling rethought. How the Covid-19 pandemic is changing education. Fernando M. Reimers,

29. The crisis has shown that young children have a much stronger need for face-to-face education than older students. For the early childhood and primary education sectors distance learning came with distinct challenges. Only a few countries were able to put in place a virtual kindergarten for children. Students in primary and lower secondary schools have more difficulties in adapting to a new learning environment.

30. For upper secondary school and university students who have proper access to the right technology, online learning has been more effective. Due to the optimisation and individualisation of cognitive learning processes, supported and customised e-learning requires 40-60% less time than a traditional classroom setting.<sup>15</sup> However, most online learning programmes have focused on traditional academic skills and fact-learning. There is a lack of online learning opportunities to develop critical thinking, adaptability and other skills important for success in the future.

31. When rethinking education for the future, e-learning should be treated as a supplement that leads to better outcomes, not a substitute or replacement for classroom learning. The knowledge and experience gained with various modalities of remote learning are assets that could be deepened and deployed in the future, creating blended modalities of teaching and learning, also in service of greater personalisation of education, and to extend learning time and learning opportunities for all students.<sup>16</sup>

32. Education systems and institutions need to reassess and review the way in which they teach, and students learn. Quality online learning should go beyond replicating the physical lecture or transfer of knowledge through video and use a range of collaboration tools and engagement methods to ensure active experimental learning. Traditional pedagogical methods used in the physical classroom should be modernised by establishing guidelines and standards for blended learning.

33. Education systems and institutions need to introduce variety of assessment methods, relevant to new approaches to teaching and learning. As with traditional education, states should establish an accreditation scheme for online programmes to regulate offerings and ensure quality, and it is necessary to use the momentum to reshape curricula to the needs of the 21st century.<sup>17</sup> The new curricula should be less based on consuming information and memorising facts, as those are widely accessible due to information and communication technology. More attention should be paid to the development of competences – starting from critical thinking and reflective approach to information technology and information itself, and expanding with problem-solving, communication, collaboration, decision-making, creativity, adaptability, responsibility and self-efficacy, which are necessary to deal successfully with new and unknown challenges, like the present health crisis.

## **2.6. The key role of teachers**

34. With the new learning reality of the post-pandemic world, it is becoming necessary to redefine the role of the teacher. The shift from teaching culture to learning culture means that teachers are needed as guides, coaches, advisors, monitors and facilitators of the learning process, rather than just as sources of information. The success of quality online education will depend on teachers, as the emergency learning measures depended on them. Teachers were able to implement emergency distance learning modalities often without sufficient guidance training or resources. But even in contexts with adequate infrastructure and connectivity, many educators lack technological and methodological skills to facilitate quality distance learning.<sup>18</sup>

35. High quality blended and online learning must be supported by highly skilled education professionals, enjoying good working conditions and quality resources. Digital learning opportunities for teachers should include relevant methodological training and access to educational resources. Schools and institutions, teachers and students as well as their parents must be equipped with both the required infrastructure and the competency to make good use of it.<sup>19</sup>

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Andreas Schleicher, OECD, 2020 (p.3).

<sup>15</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever. This is how, Cathy Li, World Economic Forum. [weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online).

<sup>16</sup> Education in a post-COVID world: Nine ideas for public action. UNESCO, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Lessons for Education during the COVID-19 crisis, World Bank.

<sup>18</sup> UNESCO "Education Sector Issue. Note no 2.2".

<sup>19</sup> The educational response to the COVID crisis. Political declaration. Informal Conference of Education organized under the Greek Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, 29 October 2020.