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UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response

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TVET systems and labour markets

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is severely affecting technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems and labour markets amid the **double crisis** that the world is facing:

- **A health crisis**, as the pandemic is spreading and confinement measures are being taken. The health crisis is resulting in the closure of TVET providers and firms, forcing changes in the organization of training and work. This emergency situation could last for several months. Priorities include ensuring the continuity of skills development, and introducing short-term training programmes to bridge skills gaps that are caused by the health crisis.
- **An economic crisis**, as confinement measures are leading to a major recession across key economies and activity sectors, which could worsen into a durable depression. Skills development will be part of the policy response to the massive loss of jobs, to reorient workers towards employment or entrepreneurship. Besides, the crisis might lead to emerging trends in the world economy being accelerated, such as the digitization of the workplace, or reversing, such as globalization and the concentration of strategic industries in a few countries. Major shifts in the demand for skills on the labour market may occur, which TVET systems will need to address.

The impact of the crisis on the **transition towards sustainable development** is uncertain. Confinement has led to dramatic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution, but recovery plans may

focus on restarting industries as they existed before the crisis rather than initiating the transition. The capacity of the private sector to make the heavy investments required in key sectors such as energy or transportation may be reduced.

Defining the topic and related key issues

The ongoing crisis: The COVID-19 pandemic and confinement measures

The direct impact of COVID-19 on TVET systems and labour markets is uncertain

The COVID-19 disease is now present in almost all countries, but whether it will cause mass morbidity and mortality among young people aged 15-24 and adults aged 25-64 who constitute the bulk of TVET trainees and trainers and of workers is yet to ascertain. As of early April 2020, in China and Europe, severe forms of the disease had been concentrated among elderly persons and/or persons with comorbidities. However, the impact of COVID-19 on younger populations with ill-health and malnutrition, limited access to healthcare and poor living standards, mostly depending on the informal sector, such as those of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, remains to be observed.

Confinement: An unprecedented, worldwide disruption of education systems, including TVET, and an immediate impact on the world of work

School closures are generating an unprecedented disruption of education systems worldwide, including TVET. Formal and non-formal TVET providers have had to close their premises and to shift to distance learning – not all of them were ready for this. While general education subjects and theoretical learning, as well as practical training in specific fields can be delivered remotely, practical training that depends on equipment present only in training centres has been interrupted. Workplace closures have also interrupted all types of formal, non-formal and informal training that take place in affected firms. Training might not receive priority as other firms strive to ensure the continuity of their operations through telework.

Confinement is having an immediate impact on the world economy, which varies dramatically across sectors. Entire sectors have nearly stopped operating (including hotels and restaurants, tourism, public transportation, construction, etc.) while others are facing activity peaks with shortages of skilled workers (the health sector, IT business as well as agriculture and other sectors essential to the continuity of human lives). Besides the loss of activity, workers have to face a new organization of work, e.g. sanitary constraints at the workplace, or telework. The impact of confinement is bound to be most severe for vulnerable workers, especially poor, informal-sector workers in low-income countries with daily earnings and no savings, raising concerns for their survival. Women, who are overrepresented among wage labourers, own-account workers and unpaid family workers, stand to lose the most.

The looming crisis: From recession to depression?

In the short term: An unprecedented recession of the real economy caused by confinement

The recession of the real economy that has started is unprecedented. First, it is caused by legal measures taken almost simultaneously across countries and economic sectors, independently of the pre-COVID-19 economic cycle. Second, it is leading to the closure of entire economic sectors. The scale of the recession in countries that have taken the strictest measures is likely to go beyond what was observed in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and is being compared with the 1929 crisis that led to the Great Depression. At any rate, the economic impact of the new pandemic will thwart that of any other epidemic since 2000.

In the long term: The risk of a depression, and a possible transformation of the global economy

If recovery plans prove successful and leading economies restart rapidly once confinement measures are lifted, the world might avoid a durable depression. However, a depression is possible, which could have a differential impact on countries, depending on their insertion into the global division of labour as well as the severity and timing of their own epidemic. The depression could also have a differential impact on economic sectors – non-essential activities that are being fully suspended (e.g. tourism) might take more time to recover – and workers, jeopardizing the labour market insertion of young people, especially women and youth from disadvantaged social background.

The current recession might end up stalling or reversing globalization, with the relocation of strategic activities (starting with the production of drugs and medical materials) and hastening the digitization of workplaces – as firms will have observed the promises and pitfalls of telework, and identified managerial and material conditions for its success. All this will have major and long-lasting implications for labour markets and TVET systems.

Evidence and lessons from past practices and current crisis

The nature of the crisis (a health crisis triggering a crisis in the real economy) as well as its scale and pace (a pandemic reaching almost all countries in the world within a few weeks) are **unprecedented in the recent past**, but lessons might be drawn from previous epidemics and economic crises. Emergency situations, in which ensuring the continuity and adaptation of skills development and facilitating access to employment and entrepreneurship are key concerns, seem to provide the closest parallel.

Regarding the ongoing health crisis:

- **The closure of TVET institutions and workplaces risks having long-term consequences.** The loss of several weeks or months of learning and training will affect the learning outcomes and motivation of learners and workers, and may result in dropout or changes in career plans. Lower learning outcomes can have permanent impacts on labour market insertion and outcomes;
- **Distance learning can work**, and indeed many countries already had distance TVET programmes. However, this depends dramatically on the infrastructure and equipment available, as well as on the preparedness of teachers/trainers and students/trainees;
- **Short skills development programmes can be part of the policy response** to the epidemic. They should target jobs that are in short supply and high demand. Examples include updating and upgrading the skills of health sector workers; training workers to temporarily shift to activity sectors that are essential, ranging from agriculture to e-commerce; or supporting workers in manufacturing firms that modify their operations to address shortages, for instance, of medical material. Skills development programmes can also help workers adapt to new working conditions, especially keeping safe at the workplace, or engaging in telework.

Regarding the looming economic crisis:

- The recession/depression will have a **major, negative impact on both public and private sources of funding for TVET**, as governments will focus their spending on supporting economic activity and addressing poverty, and firms and households will see their financial situation deteriorate. Much-needed investment in TVET systems risks being postponed or cancelled;
- At the same time, **skills development will emerge as a priority**, as massive job losses and a transformation of work will take place. Specific activity sectors may not recover rapidly or ever. Trainees and laid-off workers will need to be reoriented towards other sectors, with training for either employment or entrepreneurship. Any policy to relocate strategic industries will require training workers, and so will firms' strategies to digitize the workplace and facilitate telework;
- **Social safety nets** and fiscal measures are indispensable to protect workers and firms.

Key messages and practical tips for designing policy interventions

The following messages are relevant both to TVET stakeholders (including governments, skills development authorities, sector skills councils, chambers of commerce, employers' associations, trade unions, as well as training providers and firms) in Member States as they seek to minimize the impact of the health and economic crises, and to UNESCO and other development partners as they adapt their interventions to the situation:

- **Ensure the continuity of access to TVET:** During the epidemic and confinement, each country should build on its own and other countries' experiences with distance learning (using both on-line and off-line solutions), whether provided by education or TVET systems, or by firms. Development partners should provide technical assistance and/or financial support.
- **Guarantee the safety of trainees and workers:** Training on occupational safety and health standards needs to be adapted to the COVID-19 situation, included in TVET programmes and delivered in firms that keep operating.
- **Maintain equity in TVET enrolment:** The most vulnerable students/trainees are most likely to lose touch with the system. Teachers/trainers and heads of TVET centres have a key part to play in maintaining contact with students/trainees, which is crucial to the continuity of TVET during confinement, and will reduce dropout thereafter. Specific attention should be given to women and disadvantaged groups.
- **Preserve the quality of TVET:** Supporting teachers/trainers to adapt to distance TVET is crucial, e.g. through the provision of teaching materials, equipment and training. Financial support may also be needed for those who depend on private firms that have suspended their operations.
- **Seize the opportunity to develop** curricula, teacher training, quality assurance, assessment and certification for **distance and open TVET**, which will be still relevant once the pandemic is over.
- **Adapt TVET provision to strengthen its labour-market relevance:** TVET stakeholders should undertake emergency skills needs assessments and identify sectors that are facing immediate skills shortages during the pandemic, to organize short training courses. This should lead to prospective analysis of the changing demand for skills as the economic crisis unfolds.
- **Make TVET part of the response to the economic crisis:** TVET systems need to strengthen entrepreneurial learning and mainstream digital skills for all students/trainees. Given the risk of a depression and a possible transformation of the global economy, it is all the more important for young people to develop skills that are not drawn only from traditional disciplines and to learn to be adaptable, creative, and innovative, besides being able to start a business.
- **Commit to financing TVET:** stakeholders should reach an agreement to preserve skills development budgets and programmes through the recession/depression, and engage in prospective work to identify sector and jobs that are going to be the most affected, so as to plan ahead for reskilling programmes.

Policy responses regarding skills development should be coordinated with emergency measures supporting households that have lost their sources of income – starting with cash transfers to ensure the survival of informal sector workers, in low-income and lower-middle-income countries.

Key references

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About UNESCO Education Sector's Issue Notes

UNESCO Education Sector's issue notes cover key topics related to the COVID-19 education response. They provide evidence of good practices, practical tips and links to important references for each topic in an effort to mitigate the impact of school closures.

The issue notes cover several topics under nine thematic areas, namely: Health and wellbeing; Continuity of learning and teaching; Gender equity and equality; Teaching and learning; Higher education and TVET; Education and culture; Education policy and planning; Vulnerable populations, as well as Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development

They are prepared collectively by UNESCO education colleagues across the world. The present note was developed by the Section for Youth, Literacy and Skills Development with support from UNESCO-UNEVOC and UNESCO Regional Bureaus and Offices.

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UNESCO's COVID-19 Education Response



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