

# Re-imagining teacher education for a post-pandemic future



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Distinguished colleagues, thank you for the invitation to be part of DETA 2021—this is my first virtual DETA conference and I hope it will be the last. When we meet again the next time, I hope it will be in person and in some part of beautiful Africa. My topic today is ‘Reimagining Teacher Education for a post pandemic future’ which I have prepared with my colleague Dr Betty Ogange, who leads our work in Teacher Education.

But first a word about the Commonwealth of Learning. As you know, COL is an intergovernmental organisation that works in 54 Commonwealth Member States, 19 of which are in Africa. Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions use distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training.

In this presentation, I will begin by outlining the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on teachers and highlight examples of how different countries responded to the crisis. I will then share some of the projects that COL initiated during this time. Finally, I will conclude with what lessons we can draw from the pandemic to re-imagine teacher education.

The pandemic disrupted the entire education system at all levels with lockdowns and closures that affected over 95% of the learners worldwide.

There was already a huge teacher deficit around the world, where in SSA, 70% countries face shortages at the primary level, 90% at the secondary level.

More than 250 million children were not attending school in SSA due to the pandemic. Over 60% students are excluded from online learning with huge dropout rates.

Even before the pandemic there was a learning crisis where many children were going to school but not achieving the required learning outcomes. Half the 10-year-olds in low and middle income countries were unable to understand a simple written sentence.

The learning crisis has been further exacerbated by the learning loss with school closures and lockdowns. Children in low- and middle-income countries lost nearly four months of schooling as compared to 1.5 months in high income countries.

How will the children catch up? In India when remedial classes were provided for 50 days, the number of children who could read a para went up from 15% to 48%. This is quite substantial. When there was an earthquake in Pakistan, and schools had to be closed for three months, but children fell behind by 1.5 years as teachers went ahead with the business-as-usual approach instead of offering remedial classes.

But was it really a learning loss? It is true that learning was indeed lost as the curriculum could not be covered because of the disruption. But as some suggest, the term ‘learning loss’ introduces a deficit mindset that demotivates the learners and does not appreciate the effort that teachers put in. Amidst this learning loss was a ‘learning gain’ where over and above the curriculum, both teachers and learners learnt to be resilient, managed their time better, acquired basic computer skills to learn and collaborated on various social media platforms. All these are relevant skills that will help students to catch up.

Teachers too acquired new skills. In Cote d’Ivoire teachers who had never done this before, produced digital courses. Teachers in Mali assigned homework through WhatsApp. In Cameroon, Nigeria, Tanzania and South Africa, teachers joined hands to find collective solutions. Teachers Associations too played a very constructive role in organizing webinars and online training.

How did countries respond to the challenges?

During the pandemic, we found the greatest challenge related to digital infrastructure—lack of access to devices, connectivity, electricity. Teachers were not prepared for the sudden transition to online learning. Existing inequalities were further exacerbated.

In a survey on the impact of covid 19 on education in Africa, lack of technology was cited as the biggest barrier especially in rural areas. TV and radio sustained learning for primary students while online learning proved most important for secondary learners. Educators reported not receiving any financial support for technology tools.

In SSA, most teachers lacked the digital skills needed to offer quality distance learning. This was the experience globally, where data from OECD countries indicates that only 60% of teachers had some training in ICTs.

The vulnerable are most impacted in crisis situations. It is estimated that the numbers of school dropouts will increase with 11 million girls not likely to return.

A study in the Netherlands shows that there was a learning loss of about 3 percentile points. Learners from less educated homes were more prone to learning loss.

What kind of teacher training is needed to build back better? Teachers must be digitally fluent to facilitate learning which is engaging and caters to the diverse needs of students in schools that are safe and inclusive. Parents and siblings emerged as key contributors to learning during the pandemic—how can we make them an integral part of the learning ecosystem?

Let me share some examples of how COL responded.

The first priority was to build the capacity of teachers in ICT integration, mobile learning, cybersecurity etc through the use of MOOCs.

The second was to provide access to quality content. In partnership with the OER Foundation at the Otago Polytechnic, COL launched OER4COVID which attracted participants from 89 countries. The survey conducted found that participants did not simply want access to repositories or general capacity building but rather sought urgent help with curated content aligned to the curriculum.

For low bandwidth contexts in the Pacific, COL developed a video-on-demand service using OER, in STEM subjects aligned to the curriculum of Fiji, Nauru and Samoa.

In The Gambia, COL supported the implementation of a school-based teacher development model that uses a range of technologies to support pedagogical practice for improved learning outcomes. A Toolkit for School-Based Teacher Development was deployed in 20 Basic and Senior Secondary schools where teachers can also download sharable audio and video resources.

Working closely with the Open University of the UK, COL supported teacher educators from the Kenya Institute of Special Education to develop resource materials for Inclusive Education. These have been implemented in 20 schools in Kenya. These resources are available for online access as well as sharable videos and printable downloads. COL and the Open University UK developed and offered two MOOCs: ‘Inclusive Teaching and Learning’ and ‘Creating an Inclusive School’ attracting over 900 participants.

In Sierra Leone, COL is supporting capacity building in resource digitisation and learner support for the Distance Teacher Education programme at the Freetown Teachers College. The institution is able to reach in-service teachers in different locations using both online tools and sharable podcasts on WhatsApp.

COL is supporting the National Teachers’ Institute, Nigeria towards reskilling teacher educators and teachers in OER development for learning recovery in Science, Mathematics, English and Social Studies.

COL has launched a project on Parental Learning for Uninterrupted Schooling in Ghana to promote Parent-Teacher-Community engagement, in areas with little or no access to technology. The needs assessment study reveals that, irrespective of literacy levels, parents are generally agreeable to efforts at enhancing their ability to support children with their learning. In a related project, COL partnered with UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning to offer a course on “Planning a Family and Intergenerational Literacy and Learning Programme” for adult educators and teacher educators.

These examples give you an idea of COL’s services and resources that you can draw upon. In conclusion, let us look at six issues that emerged during the pandemic and how we can learn from this experience to re-imagine teacher education.

First, we have seen that purely online options do not work for everyone. The future will be a blend of online and in-person approaches, using a range of technologies that are affordable accessible and available.

Second, as the pandemic forces governments to cut back on resource allocations, we will need to look for cost-effective solutions to bring quality learning for all. Mainstreaming OER by building the capacities of teachers and preparing learners on how to find, use and share OER could be another way forward for access to quality content.

Third, we have seen a huge rise in self-directed learning during the pandemic, as is evident from the phenomenal increases in MOOC enrolments—we can build on these foundations to promote lifelong learning for teachers.

Fourth, formal assessments and proctoring systems suffered major setbacks during the pandemic—how can we learn from the innovative approaches and build flexible models that make assessments more authentic? Credentialing and recognition strategies will need to change.

Fifth, the pandemic has highlighted the critical need for learner support not just for academic matters but also for general well-being and mental health. Parents and siblings became a critical resource in supporting learning—how can we develop an ecosystem of learner-teacher-parent to support success and sustainability?

Sixth, in order to address the growing inequalities, we need a targeted approach to address the needs of the last person in the queue—women, girls, those in remote regions and persons with disabilities.

When we look at our common future, we know that the teacher is central to it. Access to technology will be key and we can only achieve our objectives through partnerships and collaboration.

On that note, let me thank you for your kind attention.