

Digital Transformation of Education for the Future



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Thank you for the opportunity to share some reflections on Education for the Future.

Covid-19 caused the biggest disruption of education in human history where the closure of campuses affected more than 220 million higher education students worldwide. Most institutions had to pivot to emergency remote teaching. How can we draw on the four key lessons learned to shape education for the future?

One, digital technologies are here to stay. During the pandemic, the greatest challenge related to digital infrastructure—lack of access to devices, connectivity, electricity.

Technology use continues to grow with 66% of the world’s population connected to the internet.

But even within OECD countries, huge disparities exist between students who go to privileged schools and those who study at disadvantaged institutions in terms of access to computers, the Internet and a quiet place to study at home.

Teachers too were not prepared for the sudden transition to online learning. A study in the US and Canada revealed that over 50% of teachers required help with supporting remote students, and needed access to digital materials.

Open Educational Resources were in high demand. A study conducted by OER Foundation and COL found that over 75% of the respondents expressed the need for OER-based online courses.

Two, existing inequalities were further exacerbated and need targeted attention.

When crisis strikes, the vulnerable become more vulnerable. It is estimated that 11 million girls will not return to school following the pandemic.

The learning crisis that existed before the pandemic has deteriorated further. A study in the Netherlands, records a learning loss of about 3 percentile points with higher losses among students from less-educated homes.

A study in Malawi showed that 31% of students with disabilities spent very little time studying--a situation common in many developing countries.

Three, the pandemic created a momentum for self-directed learning. How can we build on this experience to create learning societies?

There has been a phenomenal increase in MOOC enrolments not just of global brands such as Coursera but universities, which had earlier hesitated to offer online courses, came forward to offer MOOCs especially for professional development.

But MOOCs have not fulfilled the initial promise of increasing access to higher education. MOOCs have mostly reached those who already have degrees and completion rates continue to remain low. How can MOOCs reach the unreached?

COL has developed blended MOOCs to suit the needs of developing countries. These gardeners in remote locations have been reached by audio-MOOCs through their basic mobile phones.

Four, the world was unprepared for the pandemic. How can we build resilient systems that can withstand future disasters?

The climate crisis has a major impact on education. The recent floods in Pakistan disrupted education where entire schools were destroyed.

The education sector too, contributes to both direct and indirect emissions, with an impact on environmental degradation. As Bill Gates points out—cement, steel and plastic (How to Avoid a Climate Disaster), which are essential for construction, are the biggest emitters of carbon. Brick and mortar institutions could add to the growing carbon footprint of the education sector.

The Open University, UK compared the carbon emissions of ICT-enhanced and face-to-face courses and found that distance teaching models had significantly lower environmental impacts (Caird et al. 2013; Caird et al. 2015). COL conducted a similar study in Botswana, and found that the average carbon footprint of the distance learning group is nearly three times lower than that of the campus students.

COL presented a report to Commonwealth Ministers of Education entitled Transforming Education for Climate Action. This report provides a road map for how ministers of education can climate proof education systems, build skills for blue and green economies, and promote education for climate action.

What are elements of education for the future?

First, the future will be a blend of online and in-person approaches, using a range of technologies that are affordable accessible and available. Because of the existing digital divide, technology must be placed in an appropriate social, cultural and political context.

Second, in order to address the growing inequalities, governments and institutions need to develop policies that address the needs of the last person in the queue—women, girls, those in remote regions and persons with disabilities. The policies that target the margins are also effective in serving the centre.

Third, we need to create an ecosystem of lifelong learning with opportunities for skilling and reskilling throughout life.

Fourth, we need to adopt a green learning agenda. This would focus on developing the skills for green jobs for a low carbon economy; life skills for a more sustainable and just future.

In short, education for the future is quality education that is affordable and accessible for all. It is education that leads to sustainable development. And finally learning must result in modelling sustainable behaviours that lead to the prosperity of the people and the planet.

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