

Shaping the Future of Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa



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Distinguished colleagues, thank you for the invitation to be part of DETA 2023—I have participated in several DETA conferences—in person and online—this hybrid conference is a sign of the times and here to stay. My topic today is ‘Shaping the Future of Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa’ 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 56 Commonwealth Member States, 21 of which are in Africa—with Togo and Gabon being the two newest members who are warmly welcomed. 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 Covid-19 on education in Africa followed by a discussion on key issues and challenges faced by the different countries. I will then share some of the projects that COL initiated to address the needs of Member States. Finally, I will conclude with what lessons we can draw from the pandemic to re-shape teacher education for the future.

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.

The pandemic showed how unprepared the education sector was for any sudden disruption.

Teachers were unprepared for distance teaching, did not have access to quality digital content and lack of ICT infrastructure proved to be a major barrier.

It became clear that building the capacity of teachers was a key necessity—especially in digital skills and addressing the learning loss that the pandemic caused. 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. New issues such as gender-based violence and mental health emerged.

In addition, the vulnerable were the most impacted during the crisis – such as children from low-income homes, persons with disabilities and displaced communities.

When schools re-opened, it had to be done in a phased manner to ensure that the momentum for learning could be restored. Schools had to prepare for water sanitation and hygiene. Studies show that 87 % of children in SSA are poor in learning and lack the functional skills to enter the labour market.

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 – In northern Ghana, families became a useful resource while in Liberia and Sierra Leone, hotlines were provided by ministries for parental feedback. Parents supported radio lessons in Rwanda.

Let us now look at some of the key issues that need focused attention.

The first relates to the digital divide. An ITU report 2022, indicates that while 60% of the global population uses the Internet, in Africa, the percentage drops to 40. The same pattern is visible in the ownership of mobile phones. In terms of gender equality, globally, 69% men use the Internet as compared to 63% women – this may not appear to be a major gap but in actual numbers it means that 259 million more men than women were using the Internet last year. Women are 12% less likely to own a mobile phone than men.

Teachers needed new skills for online pedagogy. A survey conducted in Europe found that most teachers live-streamed lectures synchronously. A large number of teachers also used asynchronous approaches by sending pre-recorded videos and audio lectures. Teachers in Mali assigned homework through WhatsApp. TV and radio sustained learning for primary students while online learning proved most important for secondary learners.

A study in the US and Canada revealed that over 50% of teachers required help with supporting remote students, needed access to digital materials and wanted assistance with technology. In Côte d'Ivoire teachers who had never done this before, produced digital courses.

Africa is a multi-lingual continent and recent studies challenge the dominant monolingual and Anglo-normative language ideologies. A recent study concluded that practice in a different cultural context enabled student teachers to gain intercultural competence. Another study in Namibia, a country of over 30 different languages, concluded that multilingual pedagogies should be included in both pre-service and in-service teacher education.

Quality of teacher education is another key concern. The Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016 – 2025 proposes key actions relating to developing quality and relevant teaching and learning materials; and enhancing quality assurance and assessment mechanisms for learning outcomes.

Another approach, which keeps the learner at the centre, involves developing a culture of care. When teacher trainees missed contact sessions for more than two weeks, tutors from Kyambogo cycled all the way to their homes to find out the reason for the absence. This culture of care creates a culture of quality in the institution.

The climate crisis has a major impact on education. The cyclones in Mozambique and Malawi disrupted education where entire schools were destroyed, leading to thousands of displaced students. Critical data and student records were wiped out entirely, leading to the collapse of systems. Teachers will be key in inculcating environmental conservation behaviours among students from an early age.

Large numbers of untrained teachers need professional development at scale. In India, the government offered an online teacher training program, where 1.5 million teachers were required to complete the training over two years if they wished to remain employed.

If the SDG 4 goals are to be realized by 2030, SSA needs an additional 15 million teachers. It is significant that the proportion of trained teachers in the region has declined steadily since 2000. Gender parity in the teaching profession is lower than in other Commonwealth regions where female teachers make up 90% of the teaching force. In SSA, there are only 50% female teachers at the primary level with 30% at the secondary level. If 15 million additional teachers are to be trained, the only viable option is distance learning.

COL uses open and distance learning to increase access, improve quality and lower the costs of the professional development of teachers, both pre and in service. Let me share some examples of how COL does this.

COL's strategy is to address the issues of teacher quality and numbers by focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa and using technologies that are available, affordable and appropriate.

Developing ODL policies for teacher training at the national level is necessary for achieving scale. Recently COL facilitated a national policy dialogue in The Gambia, initiated a process to develop a framework for school-based teacher development in Cameroon, and supported a teacher competency framework for technology enabled learning in Zambia.

We have seen a huge rise in self-directed learning during the pandemic, as is evident from the phenomenal increases in MOOC enrolments globally. COL offered needs-based teacher training online courses to build capacity in subject-specific pedagogies and topics such as ICT integration, mobile learning, cybersecurity. 'Teaching for Climate Action', currently on offer, has attracted over 1,300 participants from 63 countries.

COL Commons provides just-in-time learning opportunities for teachers where micro-credits can be earned on completing short courses – which include training in OER, Universal Design for Learning and Online Assessments.

Considering the critical need for quality teaching and learning, COL has developed several toolkits and guidelines – these include a Toolkit for Teacher Education which has been adopted in several countries including Nigeria. By following the Quality Assurance for Blended Learning course, teachers will be able to ensure the effective delivery of online professional development.

As parents and siblings became active contributors to the learning process during the pandemic, COL in collaboration with UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, developed and launched a self-

directed, self-paced online course on Family Learning and Indigenous Knowledges. To achieve effective local teacher development using global resources, contextualization is critical.

COL's Green Teacher programme is offered at NTI, Nigeria with several positive outcomes including tree plantation projects. The course on 'Teaching for Climate Action' has an open licence and can be localized for specific contexts. A diploma on 'Climate Change Education for Teachers' is another resource that you can adopt or adapt as per your need. As you are aware, most COL resources are OER.

In the last six months there has been an explosion of innovations in generative AI. ChatGPT presents exciting opportunities and unprecedented risks. We need to look at generative AI from the perspective of the teacher, the learner and the institution. In addition, we need to look at it from the perspective of the digital divide and ethics. COL has been offering several webinars so that teachers can make sense of and benefit from this new development.

Partnership is a key strategy for COL to enhance its impact. Collaboration with national and regional agencies for teacher education enable COL to demonstrate the benefits of ODL and share expertise and resources. For example, the establishment of a virtual platform for teacher training in Ghana resulted in the training of over 40,000 teachers using COL's OER resources.

These examples give you an idea of how you can draw upon COL's services and resources — COL is your organisation and it works for you. In conclusion, let us reflect on how we can learn from our collective experiences to shape teacher education for the future.

The Transforming Education Summit convened by the UN Secretary General last year sums up the key priorities that need to be addressed. There is an urgent need to address the learning loss, promote equity and inclusion, achieve digital transformation, review curricula and pedagogies and support psycho-social well-being.

To address the issue of learning loss, the World Bank has developed a RAPID framework for learning recovery. This emphasizes the need for remedial learning and continuous assessment of learning outcomes.

Because of the existing inequalities which came to the surface during the pandemic, there is a greater need for reaching the unreached. ODL has traditionally been preferred by women and girls and persons with disabilities and can be effectively used to leave no one behind.

ChatGPT can be a useful ally in reducing teacher workloads and providing personalized support. Teachers can get lesson plans, assessment tests, summaries, translations all within a matter of seconds. The point is to get used to the new tools as they emerge and ask nuanced questions to get the best results. The skill of questioning has once again resumed its significance.

Credentialing and recognition strategies will need to change in a post pandemic world. Authentic assessment, recognition of prior learning and micro-credentials will challenge established practices and provide more flexible and innovative ways of teacher training so that multiple pathways can be adopted to train the numbers of teachers required.

In an increasingly digital world, social and emotional learning will have to be prioritized both for teachers and learners. According to a study, students who participated in SEL improved their performance by 13 percentile points as compared to those who had not participated.

The educational ecosystem of the future must include members of the family. Parents, especially from low-income groups, will need to be supported and empowered to engage in the learning process of their children.

No education of the future can ignore the urgency of climate change. We need to adopt a green learning agenda which has three dimensions-- developing the skills for green jobs; green life skills for a more sustainable future and skills for a green transformation that addresses social justice.

In light of the seven areas covered, the four levers for shaping the future of teacher education are — the four Cs — connectivity, content, capacity and credentials — that will be fundamental to empowering our teaching community.

When we look at our common future, we know that the teacher is central to it and AI can only be an instrument of support and not a replacement. Technological literacy is essential if we are to understand machines and their uses. Teachers must be able to deploy software and hardware in order to maximize their powers to achieve and create. Technology also provides various channels for connecting and collaborating—our communities of practice will both motivate and inspire. As we make these transitions, DETA will continue to play a very prominent part in shaping our common future.

Let me thank DETA for all that it does and let me thank you for your kind attention.