

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EDUCATION IN NIGERIA AND SEVEN COMMONWEALTH COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 has had an enormous impact on education at every level all over the world. This research paper studies the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on the educational sector. The study was carried out by analyzing deliberations by the Commonwealth Secretariat and JET Education Services in Consultation with partners including the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACUU). The study targeted a population of young people below the age of 35. Ultimately, the study aims to suggest ways education systems can meet multiple threats in the future including from hurricanes experiences of drought and other natural disasters.

Keywords: COVID 19, Education, Nigeria, Commonwealth.

Introduction

National governments have responded in a variety of ways to the pandemic, making policy decisions and taking actions in response to both health and economic demands. Measures taken have included the imposition of 'lockdowns' in which businesses, schools and commercial outlets have been closed and individuals advised to remain at home, except for essential services such as purchasing food or receiving medical attention. Social distancing and wearing face masks have been implemented as either a compulsory or a recommended action in many countries.

The closure of schools, universities and other educational establishments as a result of this pandemic has impacted the lives of more than 60 per cent of the student population internationally. According to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the number of students affected by school and university closures in 138 countries has nearly quadrupled to 1.37 billion, representing more than three out of four children and youth worldwide. In addition, at the time of writing this report, nearly 60.2 million teachers were no longer in the classroom (UNESCO 2020). National governments have responded by providing additional support for digital learning and increasing the use of broadcast, media, though the extent to which this has been accessed and effective in supporting learning is unknown.

In April 2020, the United Nations warned that the pandemic was becoming a major human rights issue in which the most marginalised and poorest members of society were likely to be most affected. The potential long-term damage to the educational, social and economic welfare of these individuals and groups could be catastrophic. The reaction of governments and education policy managers has understandably had to be swift and, as a result, may not necessarily have been well thought out. The closure of schools is widely seen

to have been a sensible precaution, though because of the haste with which decisions were taken, there was little time for effective planning to provide support for school-age children learning at home. Two leading economists from the University of Bristol have stated:

Teaching is moving online, on an untested and unprecedented scale. Student assessments are also moving online, with a lot of trial and error and uncertainty for everyone. Many assessments have simply been cancelled. Importantly, these interruptions will not just be a short-term issue, but can also have long-term consequences for the affected cohorts and are likely to increase inequality (Burgess and Sievertsen 2020).

The need to monitor this situation, both now and in the long term, is important if we are to address the possible negative impact on school-age learners. Research such as this can make a small contribution to our appreciation of the challenges being faced by individuals, communities and schools.

Literature Review

Several major pandemics have affected humans and economies. These include influenza, smallpox, plague, acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), cholera, dengue, West Nile disease, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and tuberculosis (TB). Influenza pandemics are unpredictable but cyclical events that can have serious effects on societies worldwide. Every century since the 1500s (or roughly every 10-50 years), influenza pandemics have struck about three times. In the twentieth century, there were three influenza pandemics: Spanish flu in 1918-1919, Asian flu in 1957-1958 and Hong Kong flu in 1968-1969. Each pandemic affected human life and economic development. In the twenty-first century, influenza H1N1 2009 virus (A/2009/H1N1) was the first pandemic influenza to affect the globe. It resulted in more than 18,000 deaths (Rewar et al. 2015). According to World Bank calculations, Ebola killed over 11,000 people and cost the world more than US\$2 billion (Maurice 2016). The Zika virus outbreak in 2016 spread and threatened the health of people in 34 countries (Troncoso 2016). Scientists and governments became more concerned about the devastation of these outbreaks on the world's economies and education.

In December 2019, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) spread from Wuhan province, China, to various parts of the world (WHO 2020). COVID-19 has revealed how a pandemic can be exacerbated by the prevalence of poverty, weak health systems and a lack of global co-operation. It has also seriously impacted on the delivery of education. By the end of July 2020 approximately 17,000,000 cases of COVID-19 had been reported worldwide with more than 660,000 deaths, placing the health systems in many nations under severe pressure. In addition, the pandemic caused major disruption to global social and economic structures, leading to the greatest global recession since the 1930s.

Impact of the Pandemic and School Closures on Education

Education plays a critical role in the fulfilment of all 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (Global University Network for Innovation 2019). COVID-19 cannot be addressed without linking it to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.' The evidence that has emerged from the broader impact of the crisis in this area is alarming. UNESCO estimates that

about 1.25 billion students have been affected by the pandemic, presenting a critical challenge to the achievement of SDG 4 (Solberg and Akufo-Addo 2020). Suzanne Grant, director of the International Institute for Education Policy (IIEP), meanwhile, emphasises the need to attend to the gender dimension of the COVID-19 school closures, as evidence suggests that both education and gender are neglected with any disease outbreak (UNESCO 2020). The threat of inequality leads to the dereliction of rights and detracts from the quality of life. Education has a direct impact on a state's economy and on an individual's quality of life (Ozturk 2008).

The closure of schools around the world has affected all levels of education. Globally, by 10 March 2020, one in five students was staying away from school as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, while another one in four was barred from higher education institutions (UNESCO 2020). On 13 March 2020, governments in 49 countries announced or implemented school closures, including 39 countries which closed schools nationwide and 22 countries with localised school closures (ibid). According to UNESCO, this figure had increased from 49 to 73 countries by 16 March 2020. By 19 March 2020, 50 per cent of students worldwide were affected by school closures as part of measures put in place to enable virus containment and spread reduction, resulting in nationwide closures in 102 countries and local closures in 11 countries, which affected 850 million students (ibid). By 20 March 2020, more than 70 per cent of the world's learners were affected by school closures, with 124 countrywide school closures reported (ibid).

Methodology

The research studies that feature in the chapters that follow derived from an initial project, which aimed to contribute to thinking about the implications that COVID-19 was having on the education sector in South Africa and initiated in March 2020 by JET Education Services (JET), a non-governmental organisation. The project brought together several early career researchers (ECRs) and established experts to execute short-term, real-time research studies of how societies' educational strategies should respond in light of the global COVID-19 pandemic: these studies were branded as 'Researchers Bootcamps' to #OpenupYourThinking. At the time of publication of this report, these initiatives were either already complete (JET 2020a) or nearly complete (JET 2020b).

The online methodology developed during the South Africa-based project, drawing on a combination of volunteers supported by a credible research experience, held the potential to be used in other contexts. The Commonwealth Secretariat, in collaboration with JET, applied a similar approach across Commonwealth countries impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with focus on macro-, meso- and micro-levels. The 'Commonwealth Researchers in Pursuit' initiative (JET 2020c) was thus established on 5 June 2020. The methodology had sufficient flexibility to enable participants to work from their homes, and the potential to contribute to national, international and regional debates and decisions through the effective use of online and social media platforms.

The studies reported in this research resulted from deliberations by the Commonwealth Secretariat, JET Education Services in consultation with partners including the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU). They had the following aims, scope and desired outcomes.

Aims:

- Provide solutions to pressures being placed on education systems by the COVID-19 pandemic using an evidence-based approach.
- Allow real-time inputs to be made into education processes and systems in member countries during the pandemic.
- Keep a group of young researchers engaged meaningfully during lockdown periods, while giving them an opportunity to develop by working under the guidance of experienced researchers.

Scope and Target Participants:

- Young people (below 35 years) with an activist orientation and an interest in educational research (including university students, teachers, postgraduate students and-others).
- Researchers who were experienced enough to guide a research team to conduct credible scientific research in a short period of time.
- Well-established researchers and policy-makers who were able to act as peer reviewers and could potentially incorporate the emerging findings into key national and international processes.

Desired Outcomes:

- Agile research outputs that influence and support decision-making during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Capacity building of young researchers who would leave the project with a passion for education and an ability to contribute in their future careers.
- It was planned that the research results would not only feed into individual Commonwealth countries' decision-making processes, but also into the next Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers scheduled to be held in 2022 (tbc).

Data Analysis**Systemic Response and Education Sector Resilience**

Educational sectors in selected Commonwealth countries were analyzed on how prepared they were for the COVID-19 pandemic and how they have responded. Ways in which Commonwealth members have facilitated and supported the continuation of teaching and learning at the early childhood, primary and secondary education levels during the pandemic were identified.

Key issues and policy messages include the need for education systems to:

- Plan and be prepared to face emergencies of different types;
- Acknowledge and support students' socio-emotional and psychological well-being;
- Leverage communities by providing low-cost and low-tech solutions;
- Engage stakeholder business entities, community groups and external donors for collaboration and partnerships to ensure access to scarce resources;
- Ensure the sustainability of flexible teacher training opportunities;
- Introduce intensive monitoring strategies; and
- Intensify the response to inequality of opportunities in the education system.

The Role of Governments and Government Support for Schools

The role of governments and government support for schools looks at how India, Kenya, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Zambia have implemented mitigation measures to ensure the continuation of teaching and learning across the schooling systems while at the same time, attempting to contain COVID-19. It examines government policies by country and also surveys teachers and parents. Some key lessons and recommendations include:

- The need for governments to prioritise the health and safety of learners and educators on schools reopening;
- The importance of broad-based support and partnerships to respond to education needs, including with civil society and the private sector;
- The need, on reopening, for governments to re-establish and adequately fund all services targeting learners living in poverty (for example, school feeding programmes);
- The need for specific support measures to address the learning loss of marginalized students and the socio-psycho impact that disrupted their learning;
- The development and distribution of structured school workbooks, with weekly predesigned lessons in conjunction with television programmes;
- Adjusting the school calendar to maximise teaching time following lockdown;
- That governments should plan for teacher mobilisation, prioritising regions that have been worst hit by the crisis;
- The need to forgo eminent support for all teachers and education personnel (as frontline workers) to ensure their safety, well-being and decent working conditions;

The Role of Teachers and Other Stakeholders in Supporting Teaching and Learning

The role of teachers and other stakeholders in supporting teaching and learning seeks to understand how teachers have coped under the abnormal conditions of the global pandemic. While countries had been contemplating a return to schooling in some form, the study looks forward to how this could occur, and what schools and teachers would require for a successful return to face-to-face teaching and learning.

Key issues that emerged from this focused on the following broad themes:

- **Leadership and inequality:** Inequalities between schools that pre-dated the pandemic were exacerbated during lockdown. Yet one school was able to optimise the educational experiences of learners. There is a need to further explore the question of how this particular institutional culture - characterised by a sense of responsibility, a strong feeling of teamwork, the prioritisation of teaching and learning, and the exercise of initiative in getting activities and materials to learners - arose in the school.
- **Communication between school and home:** The study thought it possible that the large majority of learners spent most of the time schools were closed with no communication from their schools. There is a need to explore this issue further with a view to establishing communication networks, perhaps via cellphone.
- **Resources:** Government roll out of the hard- and software, connectivity and training necessary to maintain remote learning is often unrealistic. Print materials are the most obvious resources to use to keep learners busy.

The Role of Commonwealth Universities during the Global Pandemic

The role of Commonwealth universities during the global pandemic looks at ways in which universities have responded, highlighting areas such as learning and teaching, research and scholarship, as well as the different levels of governance. It highlights opportunities and challenges as the higher education sector tries to react effectively in its own operation and to contribute constructively to broader societal responses.

Access, Equity and Inclusion

This research paper explores the impact of COVID-19 on the educational opportunities afforded to the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups. Each case study - two from Ghana, and one each from Botswana, India, Nigeria, Rwanda and Sierra Leone - provides insights into a unique situation defined by the country from which data were gathered, and on a specific population sample such as migrant workers or girls.

The case studies allowed the researcher to draw out some common policy messages such as:

- **The role of technology in supporting learning:** It should not be assumed that digital technology-and e-learning are wholly effective ways of supporting learners who are out of school. Technological support during the pandemic benefited the wealthiest in society, while failing to engage with those living in the poorest communities.
- **The role of parents in supporting learning:** Parental ability to support the learning of their children is dependent upon .an ability to understand the education system and to have a reasonable level of literacy.
- **Girls are at greater risk of failure than boys:** There remains a disparity between the expectations placed upon boys and their sisters in respect of educational outcomes. This has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Lack of financial and resident security:** Migrant workers from rural areas fear for their security and suffer both financial and social discrimination and hardships that deny them opportunities to adequately support their children's learning. This situation has been emphasised during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Poverty:** The current pandemic has exacerbated the situation of disadvantaged families and communities and reduced the learning opportunities available to their children compared to those of wealthier families in the same country.
- **Lack of effective government planning for inclusion:** Beyond the policy level, there are serious omissions in planning for the implementation of inclusion, which have resulted in the further distancing of those in greatest need from their peers.

Recommendations

The research here set out to identify the ways in which gender has played a role, while also exploring factors affecting access to learning/alternative learning modalities during COVID-19. It was recommended that more attention be paid to technology for students in Africa, including promoting its use in school curricula. It further emphasises the-importance of government policies and budgets making provision for unpredictable circumstances. It recommends that telecoms companies could liaise with educational institutions to provide internet packages, as well as the need for further studies into gender roles and teacher-student relationships.

Policy Recommendations to Address the Challenges of Online Learning for Females at the Higher Education Level

- The need to develop gender-neutral curricula.
- The need for safe and supportive learning environments, where all genders can participate and learn freely.
- That higher education institution should ensure that all students are equitably included in learning, class discussions and participation, and are equally involved in the school's extracurricular activities.
- The need for co-operation between all educational stakeholders to ensure that girls and women are equally supported in pursuing their educational paths and careers, rather than conforming to traditional gender stereotypes and roles.
- That all stakeholders in the educational sector should provide girls and women with equal access to technology and digital training; stakeholders must also develop policies to ensure safety on online learning platforms;
- That higher learning institutions should support girls and women to be as technologically competitive as their male counterparts, to bridge the digital divide and minimise learning disruptions that may be caused by a lack of basic technological knowledge; and
- That higher learning institutions should include reproductive health rights and family planning methods in their curricula.

Key Recommendations needing Urgent Attention

- The need to mainstream digital communications and online learning for youth worker training and development. Youth work practice should, where possible and where resources allow, include digital tools in training programmes, professional development courses, formal youth work degree programmes and other forms of youth work education.
- The need to bridge the digital divide between youth workers and youth.
- That youth workers must be trained on the ethics and professional boundaries of digital and online media use.
- That high-quality alternatives to digital learning should be provided for working with youth and families from under-resourced communities. These could include the use of phones, newsletters, printed educational materials and home visits.
- The need to prioritise self-determined learning. Learning strategies that focus on independent self-learning allow youth workers to engage youth in meaningful learning, without having to have regular, direct contact with them.
- The need to prioritise financial and professional development support for youth workers.
- The need to facilitate sharing of COVID-19 experiences and best practice among youth workers globally.
- The study also recommends that further country-specific research be carried out, that greater recognition of youth work be provided, and that there should be support for youth workers in their role as agents of change.

Conclusion

Research-related Messages: Universities face new opportunities and challenges going forward; for example, responses to calls for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)-oriented curricula and support for vulnerable/marginalised communities. It is recommended that attention should continue to be drawn to the work that universities are 'undertaking - in terms of their resilient responses, their critical contributions to a sustainable society, and their vital role as a key partner in an overall societal response to the global pandemic. This will enhance the quality of the activities undertaken by universities by sharing best practice; by finding synergies, and by highlighting opportunities to non-traditional partners in society.

Youth engagement-related Messages: The chapter shows that Commonwealth youth are ready and keen to contribute to discussions about the role of universities in a pandemic and post-pandemic world. It is recommended that learning from this exercise should be used to offer additional research opportunities to Commonwealth youth in the future. Moreover, the perspectives of all participants should be deployed to build suggestions for similar future activities.

Innovative Solutions

Harnessing information and communication technology (ICT) and innovative digital low-cost solutions, addresses the perceptions of parents, teachers and students on the effectiveness of emergency remote teaching during the pandemic. It examines the perceived success of low-cost ICT solutions in ensuring continuity of educational provision in underserved and remote communities. It then explores policy measures, technology solutions, and other factors or elements to support teachers to ensure universal access to educational provision for these communities.

Priority issues for governments and authorities to address:

- Formal education is not designed to be adaptable to the medium of delivery or to the financial means of the family. Some families cannot afford television sets while for others internet' connectivity is still a major hurdle. Governments should ensure equity prevails in terms of access to educational services and digital technology.
- Curricula have not been adequately designed and customised for remote teaching or for broadcast media. There is therefore a need to either rethink the curriculum or design an alternative model that can be activated when remote teaching is needed.
- Teachers should be trained in remote teaching and have access to teaching technologies. Teachers should also be appropriately equipped in terms of facilities (for example, computers and internet connectivity).
- Governments should have policies on how to include parents more in the education of their children, including appropriate financial support, especially for those in underserved areas.
- Technology-enabled learning should be assessed to ensure "that in addition to promoting better learning experiences, it contributes to the resilience of the educational system to expand learning beyond the classroom.

Innovative financing mechanisms that addresses education challenges that existed before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and which will persist when the pandemic is over

explores how one of these mechanisms, results-based financing (RBF), could be employed to improve efficiencies and effectiveness in the education system. A key message arising from this chapter is that, although the global community rallied quickly in the wake of the pandemic and mobilised emergency funding to meet the urgent requirements of education systems worldwide, these forms of funding can only meet short-term needs. Such funding is unable to deliver on long-term requirements for recovery and strengthening of weak education systems. The needs of education systems have also now expanded to include various aspects of health and psychosocial support. Meanwhile, the near future will also likely see greater demands for: free basic education and 'tuition-free forms of higher education; learner nutrition programmes; catch-up programmes to redress loss of learning opportunities; strengthening of remote modes of teaching to cater for out-of-school children who fail to return to school; and re-enrolment of the most vulnerable groups, especially girls.

As a result, long-term financing will be necessary to augment shrinking conventional forms of funding. This study highlights a diverse range of innovative financing mechanisms in this regard, but in particular recommends that governments explore the use of results-based financing (RBF) instruments. This is because such mechanisms enable governments to assess their capacity to raise additional capital, while at the same time improving the effectiveness and efficiency of education systems via a clear focus on well-defined outcomes.

Finally, a synthesis of the literature and other documents on well-being among school-age children in the African context draws on ways in which structural inequalities affect individual ability to access key resources, systems of support and opportunity. It juxtaposes intersectional inequalities against a critical review of well-being interventions or programmes, as well as exploring the potential use of using intersectional lenses within investigations of well-being.

Understanding of and interventions related to well-being within the school system remain ad hoc, uncoordinated, sparse and largely addressing perceived vulnerable groups, which are mostly outside of the school system. The researcher notes that efforts at enhancing the well-being of school-age children in Africa remain inadvertently limited by the lack of both data and co-ordination of existing interventions. Therefore, the key message is the urgent need to expand explorations of well-being, taking into consideration multi-dimensional aspects of well-being and the engagement of other sectors within this effort. Critical stakeholders should include the health, educational and community development sectors.

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