

## The Skills Sector and COVID-19: Practical Actions

### Education Section, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

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The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, at its peak affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries. Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94 per cent of the world's student population<sup>1</sup>. The crisis has exacerbated pre-existing education disparities by reducing learning opportunities for many of the most vulnerable. Learning losses threaten to have long-lasting human development and economic impacts.

The typical reliance of the technical vocational education and training (TVET) sector on face-to-face learning, coupled with limited remote capacity has seen widespread closure of training centres. Over 90 per cent of respondents from 63 countries [reported](#) closure of TVET schools and centres in their countries. In South-East Asia and the Pacific, partial shut-downs and limited functioning are the norm. Work-based learning and apprenticeship programs have been most affected by the pandemic, and young people are particularly vulnerable in a contracting labour market.

The skills sector has not traditionally embraced flexible learning. The [ILO-UNESCO-World Bank](#) estimate that less than 16 per cent of institutions regularly used remote learning prior to the pandemic. Skills training relies on practical demonstration on industry-standard equipment which is not easily replicated with remote learning. Few teachers are trained to prepare remote learning resources and students lack digital skills and/or have limited access to required technology. The pandemic has demonstrated the limitations of this delivery model. While remaining realistic about what can be done in the short term – and in low technology environments – COVID-19 is a potential driver of sectoral reform.

### Key points

- a focus on **delivering skills training can promote economic recovery**, but requires **institutional changes to ensure COVID-19 safe practices** in training institutions.
- a focus on **learning continuity, flexibility in delivery and adapted assessment models** will help to contain economic and skills development disruptions.
- a post-COVID-19 future presents **future shifts in labour market conditions** and an **opportunity to embrace remote learning models** to meet learners' needs, while increasing adaptability to ever-changing skills priorities.

### Identifying challenges and potential solutions

#### *Sectoral and institutional challenges*

**Challenge:** Many countries and institutions are without a plan for re-opening or adapting skills training to the COVID context.

**Solutions:** Encourage partners to prioritise skills training institutions as an essential service and development partners consider [technical assistance or financial support](#).

- Support Government development of a [framework for early reopening and adaptation](#).

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<sup>1</sup> UN Secretary General Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond  
[https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg\\_policy\\_brief\\_covid-19\\_and\\_education\\_august\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf)

- Develop institutional [recovery plans](#) that consider out of term programs and extending institutional opening hours and days; employing industry volunteers as trainers; structured pedagogical enrichment; ability grouping; peer to peer coaching; and a focus on trainee-teacher engagement to reduce drop out.
- Explore the impact of closures and disrupted services on the financial viability of institutions.

**Challenge:** Difficulties adapting the skills sector to a changing global landscape.

**Solution:** The global landscape is changing across many industries and presents an opportunity if the sector responds to new demands for skills training.

- Short term, targeted TVET training can help countries adapt to the pandemic. [TVET institutions have the potential](#), for example, to address the needs of healthcare workers, those producing required medical equipment and related services. The Philippines has repurposed some TVET [facilities and trainees](#) to develop protective equipment in partnership with local governments. The [National Ebola Training Academy](#) established in Sierra Leone during the 2014 Ebola crisis offered clinical training modules for frontline health care workers. The training [contributed to controlling the outbreak](#).
- Other opportunities to address changing industries include responding to an increased demand for individualised childcare, pivoting tourism and hospitality industries from international to local markets, and refocussing agricultural export marketing training to domestic market development.

#### *Delivery challenges*

**Challenge:** Institutions are unprepared for face-to-face training in a COVID-safe way.

**Solutions:** Change practices to accommodate social distancing and staggered workshop, classroom or laboratory instruction. Some institutions may already have staggered timetables and could consider increasing remote learning activities.

- Implementing [strong occupational health and safety](#) guidelines to protect students and workers, adapting delivery arrangements to reduce physical contact, actively preventing disadvantage and exclusion, and supporting paid health leave for staff.
- Skills institutions in Thailand and Australia have reported successfully maintaining in-person training models while using precautionary measures such as social distancing.

**Challenge:** Adapting to flexible learning and support for learning continuity in a variety of education contexts.

**Solutions:** Review the remote learning models outlined in the Education Section's 'Continuity of learning during COVID-19 education system shutdowns: Practical solutions' (available on the DFAT education resources page).

- Invest now to train teachers, instructors, managers and learners in digital skills and focus.
- [UNESCO](#) and the [Commonwealth of Learning](#) have extensive lists of TVET and higher education resources available for consideration. ILO has collated [resources to assist TVET trainers to upskill in teaching online](#) including free online classes and practical tips.
- Promote uptake of remote learning and workplace learning where possible through private sector partnerships. South Africa, for example, has negotiated [cost free access to university and TVET college sites](#) for learners.
- Support providers to maintain and quality assure remote learning [using the APEC toolkit](#).

**Challenge:** Unrealistic expectations to deliver and assess standard curriculum remotely.

**Solution:** Obtain sectoral agreement to moderate expectations about what can be achieved in the COVID-19 period and enable assessment flexibility.

- Institutions can begin by modifying learning goals. Consider focussing on [transversal skills](#) or employability skills to prepare young people for the workforce and for meaningful and responsible lives.
- Consider offering some part-qualifications, accredited modules or micro credentials to increase learning flexibility and maintain some engagement with students.
- Be flexible in assessment. UNESCO-UNEVOC have identified several countries using [asynchronous assessment approaches](#) to respond to the pandemic. Canada is setting end-of-study projects to be later assessed; video recordings are being used to evaluate work in Chile; and work is being mailed to teachers for evaluation in Kyrgyzstan.
- Focus on recognition. Consider employing industry or teaching staff to assess individual learning using any existing [recognition of prior learning](#) (RPL) policies or frameworks. RPL and similar processes exist in many countries to assess formal, informal and non-formal learning, and frequently rely on informal tests, conversation, observation or simulations to assess learning. Recognition processes are mostly used in competency based learning, but South Korea's [Academic Credit Bank System](#) confers degrees to students with disrupted learning, promoting lifelong learning across the education sector.

**Challenge:** Address a lack of student engagement and high drop-out numbers.

**Solutions:** Obtain sectoral agreement to moderate expectations about what can be achieved in the COVID-19 period and seek assessment flexibility.

- Keep students informed to reduce potential dropout numbers, ideally involving employers and workplaces to promote longer term re-employment opportunities.
- [Global survey](#) responses found that trainers are using phone calls or SMS to provide simple learning activities and attempting to nudge students to promote engagement.
- Australia has implemented [measures](#) such as stipends, short courses and reduced fees tuition to incentivise learning and to support education institutions, funded by both government and tertiary institutions.

This resource is one of a number of tools produced by the Education Section (DFAT Human Development and Governance Division) on the human development impacts and issues related to COVID-19 disruptions.

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