

Summary

Overview of emerging country-level response to providing educational continuity under COVID-19

What's working? What isn't?

Authors

Chris Joynes, Education Development Trust

Emma Gibbs, Education Development Trust

Kate Sims, Education Development Trust

Input from Rob Rodney (UK Department for Education) and Jamie Proctor (UK Department for International Development and the EdTech Hub)

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Executive summary

Scope of study

This report describes national policy and strategy responses for ensuring educational continuity in the context of widespread school closures implemented as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study focuses on a selection of high-income and low-income contexts deemed to be of greatest interest to the EdTech Hub (including key stakeholders from DfE and DfID). The selected countries include:

- Asia: China, Japan, Singapore, South Korea
- South Asia: Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal
- Sub-Saharan Africa: Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, Ghana

The evidence highlights the current, and rapidly changing status of national policy and strategy responses to date. The report examines key themes emerging from policy and strategy response and reflects on these: which are working, and which are not working so well? The nature of the evidence and material available at this stage of the crisis makes firm conclusions hard to reach. Despite this the report concludes with a set of recommendations supported by the literature as it stands.

Key themes

Policy and strategy development are nascent and prioritising access following school closure

At a global level, most countries affected by the COVID-19 pandemic are in the process of formulating and implementing their initial responses in terms of educational provision. The policy/strategy landscape is best described as emerging and fluid, and the available documentation that describes this is 'grey' and often lacks detail. It is difficult to make categorical statements about what is and is not working.

Despite this, it is possible to get a sense of the range of approaches that governments have taken as they attempt to ensure educational continuity. Perhaps unsurprisingly there is, at this stage in the crisis response, there is little documentation about policy and planning above and beyond the immediate challenge of providing access to education. Notably, this review found little material concerned with how states are designing policy to support to teachers, protect the most vulnerable pupils and continue to ensure that safeguarding is taken seriously.

Centralised systems are better able to take swift action

The resources collected in this review suggest that more centralised systems have been able to mobilise their responses extremely quickly and have utilised their ability to take rapid action to enact substantial policy changes at short notice. China, South Korea and Uganda are good examples of this approach.

These centralised approaches do not necessarily come at the expense of a degree of local autonomy. China and South Korea have provided a central educational platform to support distance learning with resources and some guidance and/or training but schools and teachers have autonomy to plan and deliver remote learning to suit their context, within the guidelines provided. The balance of central direction and action combined with locally delivered support at the level of the school is an important aspect of this approach.

Multi-partner approaches to delivery, including in partnership with private sector on ICT infrastructure seem important

Multi-level and cross-sectoral partnerships appear to be key to a successful and rapid roll-out of remote learning. In general the focus of such partnerships has been on: improving communications infrastructure; providing students with (or loaning them) EdTech equipment such as tablets; subsidising internet access or mobile data; developing educational content or making existing content freely available and; developing new educational platforms (for example, mobile apps).

Partnerships with multilateral organisations seem to have played an influential role in decision-making in low income countries during the immediate response.

Delivery mechanisms for remote learning, matched to capacity, existing infrastructure and user access to technologies requires careful consideration

Many governments seem to be leaning towards high-tech solutions over low- or no-tech solutions. Most countries, particularly higher income countries, are not prioritising anything other than online education, except in one or two cases where TV broadcasting is being used to ensure the hardest to reach have access to education. Even then, this appears to be a short-term solution, with a move to online being favoured.

Swift roll-out of educational content accompanied by clear messaging

The rapid decision-making and action taken by many governments has been impressive. Approaches to communicating this roll-out have varied. In China, large scale tele-conferences to communicate the roll-out of online learning contributed to consistency of messaging. In other countries, including several in sub-Saharan Africa, where communication of new policy initiatives has been through social media channels, the messaging has been less clear.

Beyond access to remote education

Our document review uncovered little focus on the **quality of education**. The priority has been access. A next stage emphasis on quality of home schooling will need to follow if school closures are protracted. How to keep children safe, how to support staff, how to engage families and parents, how to tackle equity; these are all important areas that have not, as yet, received much attention.

Measuring the impact of policy

There is an urgent need to review the efficacy of approaches to the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of remote learning policies, both for ongoing decision making and longer-term learning. Programme pilots, phasing of scale up and the introduction of dedicated task-forces are all methods in use currently by governments responding to the COVID-19 crisis.

Recommendations for policymakers

1. Learn from policy and strategy development around the world and adapt policy based on data

Policymakers should follow and learn from the steps taken in other countries, drawing on evidence from countries that were impacted by the pandemic earlier. Adopting an adaptive data-driven policy-making approach will support success longer term and is essential in a rapidly changing policy context.

2. Promote access and reduce costs to learners

Online learning can involve costs to students. In many instances charges for internet connectivity will bar students in marginalised groups from participation in learning. Such costs could, as in China, be reduced by government collaboration with internet service providers and other telecommunications companies.

3. Prioritise or move towards centralised action combined with scope for an element of local autonomy

Centralised systems appear better able to act quickly and decisively and the country responses analysed in this report suggest this is good. Centralised action does not preclude some autonomy. Agile local response is a vital element and can sustain support for learners, focus school and teacher action and underpin good pedagogy for remote learning¹.

4. Plan for both the immediate and the long term

There is a need for twin track planning. Responding to the immediate crisis while planning for the long term. Initiatives undertaken in response to COVID-19 will change participation in education after the pandemic has eased and schools have re-opened. Long term planning should include approaches to teacher development, resource development, agreements with operators and other factors that will have value and utility over time.

¹ See sister report on *best practice and pedagogy for remote teaching*.

5. Ensure remote learning plans are based on the most limited estimate of technological infrastructure and make necessary system upgrades

Action should be taken that is appropriate to estimates of limited access to electrical and communications infrastructure.

Key private-sector, civil-society and governmental internet platforms will experience great increases in demand during the emergency. It is essential that these systems can function effectively under these increased demands. Such upgrades might be necessary to bandwidth, servers, security features or other items.

6. Strive for clarity, decisiveness and support in government action and coherence in donor and geographic coordination

The point has been made already that centralised systems appear able to move swiftly. It is also important that action is taken and supported by clear communication and support of the right nature provided to key system stakeholders (as in China).

Where donor, partner and/or regional government structures bring additional complexity, coordination and coherence is key. Coordination among activities can be missing (as in Pakistan), and should be initiated as soon as possible. Lack of coordination among donor agencies can be exacerbated by decentralisation or by provincial/prefectural responsibility for education.

7. Support cross-sectoral collaboration and alliances

Collaboration across government and with partners appears, in some cases, to have aided the effectiveness of the emergency response in the current crisis. Within government, such collaboration can involve the Ministry of Education and a ministry of telecommunication or technology. But such collaborations can also range between government and the private sector or, in the case of LMICs, between donor agencies and the private sector, with government facilitation (as in Rwanda).

8. Consider education equity in relation to all forms of remote education

As many countries focus their efforts on online learning, equity issues resulting from different forms of digital divide will proliferate. No country currently has internet connectivity, device penetration and the absence of poverty necessary to ensure that online learning is equitable. Print, broadcast and other means should in many instances supplement and even supplant efforts to shift education online.

9. Engage parents and families in home-based education, while recognising that many disadvantaged learners lack effective family support

Family engagement is crucial to home-based education. Parents and family members can influence the activities of their children, determine the use of devices (including radios), and establish norms and priorities (notably in relation to girls' education in some countries). Encouraging parents and family members to support home-based education—and the focus that it requires—seriously, is critical for success. It is also extremely important to consider the very real different family circumstances children live in. Not every child has access to effective family support and, without mitigation of the risk, existing disadvantage will deepen during a period of school closure.

10. Adopt a learning-focused and adaptive mindset

Countries are reacting rapidly to a crisis and developing (and implementing) new policy at a speed that does not always allow for things to be properly worked through. This speed of implementation also does not allow for unintended consequences to be recognised before it is too late.

Adopting a learning-focused and adaptive mindset will aid governments in keeping track of whether these policy interventions are working and will allow opportunities to tweak or pivot where they are not. Such approaches are common in policy and programming in normal times but are even more important in a context of unforeseen crisis and rapidly shifting circumstances.

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