Teachers’ work and wellbeing in the pandemic : A study on future of work in education

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**Abstract**

Teachers' work took a drastic turn as schools across the globe closed down their academic activities and teaching learning shifted to an online or remote mode. Teachers were under pressure to adapt to the digital and online technologies to engage with students in this new learning environment. This study investigates the first-hand experiences of the workforce in the education sector in the Asia Pacific region who have been at the frontline during the pandemic. The main objectives of the study were to assess the impact of the school closures on employment and working conditions in the education sector, their experiences of and concerns about online teaching and learning, the extent of permeation of digital technologies in education and its implications for the future of work in the sector. Data was collected from 1574 respondents, mostly teachers from 22 countries in the region and through a quantitative survey questionnaire with 62 items. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 16 respondents, teachers and union staff members of teacher unions from across 9 countries. The study shows that despite severe limitations such as access to digital devices needed for work, professional training and support, teachers did their best to meet the demands of the online and remote mode of teaching learning. However the study points to large gaps, reinforcing the need to invest in teachers (UNESCO 2015), provide devices, training and support in the use of ICT resources and appropriate pedagogy.

A majority of the survey respondents were employed in government institutions and in regular, full-time positions. Despite this, there was decline in regular full-time employment during the pandemic and about 16% reported a change in the terms and conditions of their employment. For nearly half the respondents, work had shifted entirely to an online mode and for 70% it was a combination of online and remote modes. Nearly a fourth of all respondents reported increased workload expressing heightened anxiety about job security. Nearly half the respondents were stressed about the future of their career. Even as the workforce tried to cope with the drastic shift in their mode of work, there was some form of reduction in their compensation for 21.8% of them. Devices needed for work were provided by their institutions in less than half of the cases. A majority of respondents had spent out of their pocket on devices and materials needed for work, which were not reimbursed.

Intensification of work was a major characteristic of work during the pandemic as reported by survey respondents and interviewees. One indicator of intensification was the increase in hours of work to over 10 hours per day for over 25% of the respondents. Increased workload was one of their major concerns and was accompanied by discontent with their own quality of work due to poor interactions with their students, and lack of recognition for the vast changes in nature of work. Although their mode of teaching was in an online environment, conventional resources such as textbooks were most commonly used. In the interviews, teachers did however share their own initiatives to create digital resources. A major concern that emerged for teachers from the survey and interviews was regarding their physical and emotional wellbeing, including personal health and safety followed by concerns about students’ learning and their emotional wellbeing. There were fears over excessive screen time for themselves and their students, and lack of in person interactions making students unempathetic and many looked forward to the reopening of schools. Being a part of teacher unions provided a sense of community connect and was an important source of support for many during the pandemic.

Large gaps were evident in access to digital devices, ubiquitous for work during the pandemic. Only about 43% of all respondents had laptops or personal computers they could use for their work, while most others relied on smartphones to conduct their work. Subregional disparities in access was starkly evident with a mere 12.9% teachers in south asia having access to personal computers or laptops. Teachers interviewed from South Asian countries noted a sharp digital divide among teachers and hard to reach students, leading to disparities in learning. Subregional disparities were equally evident with respect to provisioning of devices for work by institutions which was at a low 27.4% in south asia and a high of 69.3% and 58.3% in north asia and pacific. Gaps in digital skills were also quite evident with a majority of survey respondents ranking themselves as novices or advanced beginners. Inadequate access to devices and limited skills with use of these were accompanied by lack of internet access, which was reported to be challenging. Professional development in the use of digital technologies were availed by only 55% of the respondents, while 37.4% had not received any such training. For a majority of the respondents and interviewees learning to use digital devices happened through informal channels and peer support and through individual efforts.

88.4% of respondents in the study believed that use of digital technologies which were widespread during the pandemic will continue into the future. However, only 25.4% of respondents felt ‘well-prepared’ for the future of work. Higher percentages of those who ranked themselves at the novice level with regard to specific digital technologies, felt ‘not prepared’ or ‘somewhat prepared’ for future changes of work. Interviewees expressed concerns about job losses, layoffs and contractualisation of teacher workforce as the digitisation of teaching intensified in future. They noted emphatically that technology could not replace teachers. These findings have specific implications for policy and programmatic action: Investment in teachers by providing requisite devices, technical support, and need based professional development. Recognition of teachers who valiantly served under great stress with little support as frontline workers. Extension of support to teacher communities of practice and continuing professional development through peer groups and networks. Inclusion of teachers and their representatives in policy development and decision-making as the education sector takes on the challenges of a post pandemic world.

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