Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Education and Teaching in Asia-Pacific

Future of Work in Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education workforce in the Asia Pacific region. Large-scale school closures in the region led to schools shifting to an online or remote mode of teaching and learning, impacting the working conditions of scores of employees in the sector. The study investigates the experiences of the education workforce in using digital technologies for teaching-learning, challenges faced, concerns about the future of work and professional development needs and support to prepare for the future. It finds that, despite several limitations, such as inadequate access to digital devices and the absence of training in the use of digital technologies, education sector workers and teachers in particular did not spare any effort in ensuring that teaching-learning continued for students in the online or remote mode.

Primary data was collected between 15 July and 6 August 2021 from educators through member organisations of Education International (EI) through quantitative survey and qualitative interviews. A total of 1,862 responses from 22 countries were received and analysed. Of these, the largest number were from South Asia (44.1%), followed by North Asia (23.4%), Southeast Asia (19.4%), and the Pacific (12.9%). Most of the respondents (83.7%) were employed in government institutions in regular full-time positions (83.9%). About 59% worked in primary education, followed by about 25% in secondary education. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 16 participants from 9 countries across the region, including 7 teachers and 9 union staff members.

The study was conducted by researchers from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India, and with the technical and financial support from the International Labour Organization Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

1. Impact of the pandemic and school closures on employment and working conditions in the education sector

The outbreak of the pandemic forced a majority of schools to close and migrate their operations online or via remote teaching-learning. Despite a large majority of respondents (83.7%) employed in government institutions, and in regular, full-time positions (83.9%), about 16% reported a change in the terms and conditions of their employment. Nearly a fourth of all respondents (23.7%) reported increased workload. Heightened anxiety related to job security is evident from the fact that about a fourth of the respondents (23.2%) reported being worried about losing their jobs, and about half of the respondents (46.7%) were stressed about the future of their career. Many participants in the qualitative interviews expressed concerns over pay cuts and job losses in the future due to digitisation as well.

2. Shift to online or remote mode of teaching and experiences and concerns about quality of teaching and wellbeing

A majority of the respondents (55.1%) had worked 8–10 hours a day before the pandemic, whereas 25.5% reported working 10 hours or more a day during the pandemic. Similarly, the percentage of respondents who spent 8–10 hours on digital devices had increased by 16.7% and those spending over 10 hours had increased by 15.1% from before the pandemic. Yet, 42.7% did not think they were able to work efficiently during the pandemic, and 32.1% perceived a decline in their own quality of work. Top concerns ranged from lack of adequate resources in digital form to concerns about lack of interactions with peers and students and their own and their students' emotional wellbeing.

3. Extent of technological permeation in schooling, access to digital devices, and competencies in ICT

Large gaps are evident in access to devices in the region. Only about 43% of all respondents had laptops or personal computers they could use for their work, while most others (33.7%) relied on smartphones to conduct their work. Availability of personal computers and laptops was lowest in South Asia (12.9%), where the most accessed devices were smartphones (36.9%) This indicates a suboptimal, stressful work environment for a large percentage of the workforce and poor quality of engagement with the teaching-learning process for teachers. Sharp digital divide among teachers and hard-to-reach students, leading to disparities in learning, were noted by many interviewees. Low access to devices was accompanied by increased usage and low perceived competence. A majority of respondents (43.5%) ranked themselves as advanced beginners or novices in digital skills.

4. Professional development opportunities for teachers and concerns about working conditions and the future of work

There were major gaps in formal avenues of professional support available to teachers. Just about 55% availed professional development opportunities in the use of digital technologies, of which 27.8% were by their institutions, while 37.4% did not have any such training. Lack of professional development opportunities was a challenge for many. Given the low level of self-reported competence, learning on their own, with some help from others or at their own cost, was the most prevalent mode of learning to use digital technology (67.6%). Formal avenues for professional development emerge as a high priority for nearly all respondents, with managing teaching-learning and orchestrating digital technologies being the highest (53.9%).
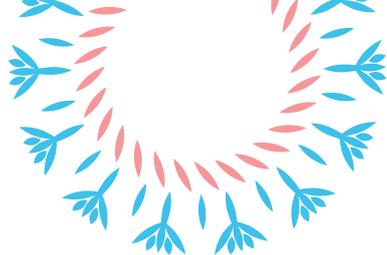
Low access with high use meant intensification of work under suboptimal conditions. Low competence and lack of professional development have led to fear of being unprepared for work in the future.

An overwhelming majority (88.4%) believed that the use of digital technologies would continue into the future of work but only 25.4% believed they were well prepared for such a future. Fears of being 'not prepared for the future of work' were higher among those who ranked themselves at the novice level in digital technologies. Professional knowledge, technical support, and access to ICT devices were among the requirements for being better equipped for the future of work. Concerns about the increase in appointment of underqualified teachers with lower pay and in contractual terms of employment were heightened.

5. Support for teachers and education support personnel with regard to the online/remote mode of work

The sudden shift to an online or remote mode of teaching had resulted in undue stress on the providers, particularly schoolteachers for whom ICT was a completely new and unfamiliar space. The suddenness of this shift meant that most of the teachers had to teach themselves how to use the devices and digital applications and quickly respond to the demands of the changed mode of work. In the absence of formal technical support, peer learning was most effective, which reinforces the importance of recognising and strengthening informal networks. Support from unions, collective bargaining, and advocacy were invaluable in coping with the multiple challenges at the time of the pandemic.

Conclusions and recommendations

The study provides clear evidence of major changes in working conditions in the education sector due to school closures during the pandemic. The abrupt shift to an online and remote mode of teaching and learning caught a majority of the workforce unawares. Many faced job losses and had taken pay cuts, leading to undue economic stress. This was at a time when
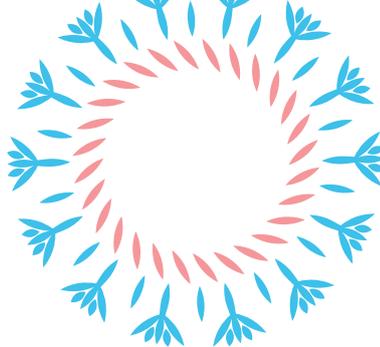
many were under stress due to physical and mental health issues as well. On the work front, the shift to the online mode was predicated on widespread accessibility to digital technologies, which was not the case. Low access with high use meant intensification of work under suboptimal conditions. Low competence and lack of professional development have led to fear of being unprepared for work in the future. The undeniable shift towards digital and online modes of teaching-learning requires systemic responses in terms of access to devices, training, and systematic, institutional support for the workforce in the sector. Based on the findings from this study, we put forth the following recommendations for policy and programmatic action.

1 ACCESS TO DIGITAL DEVICES FOR WORK

Severe shortages in access to devices for teachers require urgent attention. Education sector workers must be provided requisite devices for their work by their institutions along with technical support regarding their use.

2 BETTER PAY AND HEALTH INSURANCE

Teachers in precarious terms of employment must be adequately compensated for their time and work. All teachers must receive material support for internet access and online and offline materials required for work. Many countries do not extend health insurance to teachers, which must be remedied immediately so they can safely return to their places of work.

3 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

To help them prepare for the future of work, teachers should have access to professional development initiatives based on their current needs. This includes changes in the teacher preparation curricula to include meaningful ICT integration.

4 RECOGNITION OF TEACHER COMMUNITIES

Teachers have relied heavily on their peer community for support with regard to learning to teach in such an unfamiliar digital environment. In many cases, the peer support has been even more meaningful than conventional training and workshops. These existing communities of practice need to be formalised, and such peer groups and networks further strengthened and supported.

5 RECOGNITION FOR TEACHERS' WORK

Teachers have been valiantly working through the pandemic, doing complex work, for many at great personal costs, and their efforts need wider, systematic acknowledgement to accord the profession the recognition it deserves. It means providing them better working conditions, which will have a long-term impact in encouraging teachers to stay on in the profession and future generations to take up the profession.

6 INVOLVEMENT OF TEACHERS AND THEIR UNIONS IN SOCIAL AND POLICY DIALOGUE

Teachers are on the front line of the education system and thus have clear sight of the community, students, and their issues and needs. Teachers and their representatives must be included in policy and programme development and decision-making as the education sector takes on the challenges of a post-pandemic world.